

TELANGANA'S KCR  
GOING NATIONAL

DEFENCE PROJECTS  
BATTLING THE GREENS

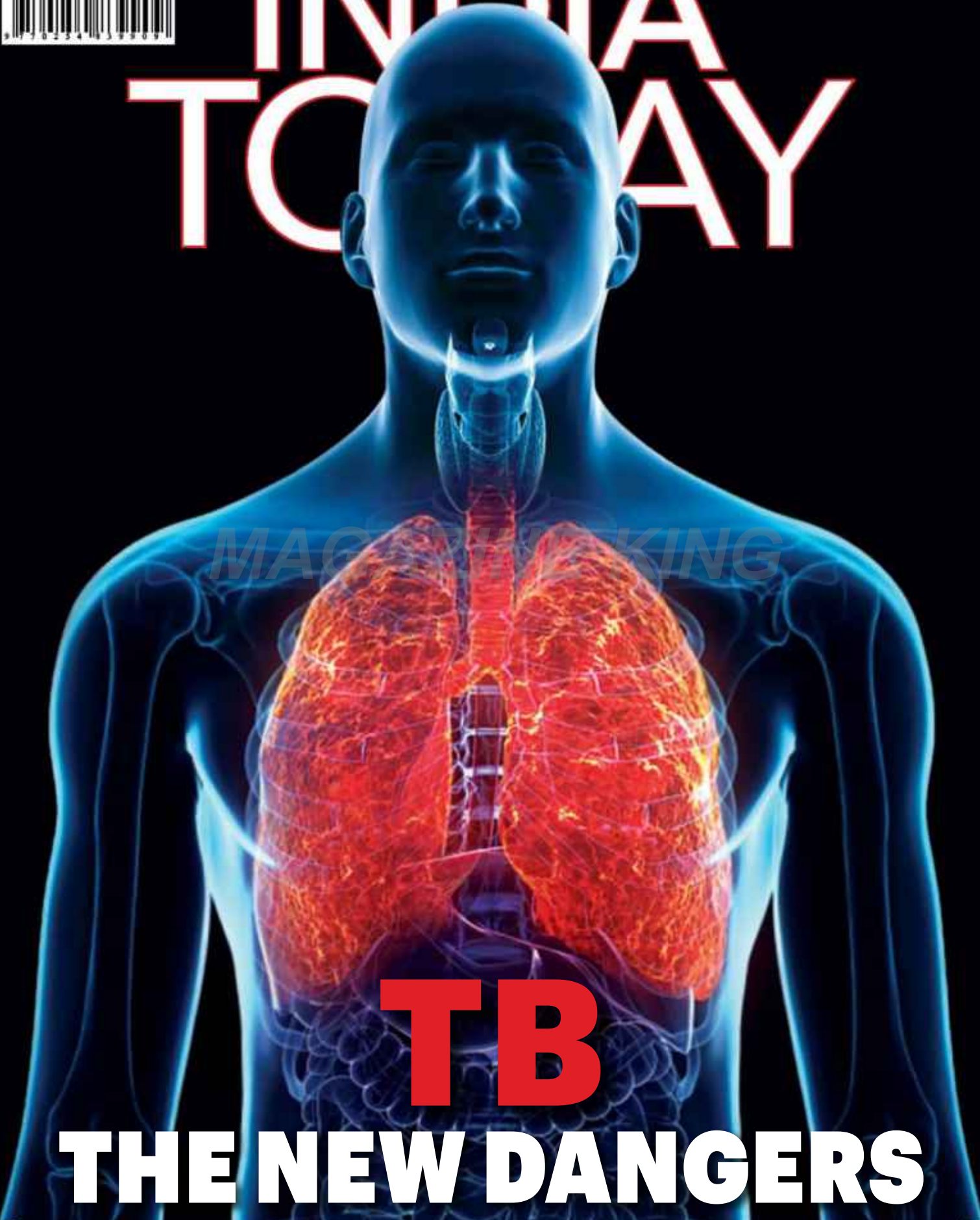
GUJARAT LIONS  
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# INDIA TODAY



MAGAZINE

# TB

## THE NEW DANGERS

AS DRUG-RESISTANT TUBERCULOSIS CASES AND DEATHS RISE IN INDIA,  
THE BATTLE TO ERADICATE THE DISEASE BY 2025 GETS TOUGHER

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**T**hrough the Covid-19 pandemic that inaugurated this decade, there was one refrain that we occasionally heard from health experts with their ear to the ground. That while the newly minted SARS-Cov-2 virus indeed caused a strange and often lethal form of flu, India could not afford to focus its periscope exclusively on its control. For, a much older affliction still stalked the land, silently exacting a consistently high toll: tuberculosis.

The spectre of TB not only continues to haunt India, it has been sharpening its knife-edge with a vengeance and coming for us in newer and more dangerous ways. Already we bear a big part of the global disease burden. Not only does India account for almost a quarter of the 10 million people afflicted with TB annually across the world, but of the yearly global toll of 1.4 million, India contributes 400,000 deaths or a little less than a third of them. And now, molecular analysis is disclosing to us a deadlier frontier of that war. The *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* develops gene mutations in response to common anti-TB drugs that render it a much more truculent enemy. The mutant form, known as Multi-Drug-Resistant (MDR) TB, and its even more murderous cousin—Extensively Drug-Resistant (XDR) TB—have seen an alarming rise of late. India has the world's highest burden of MDR-TB—its 119,000 cases account for 26 per cent of the global total.

One of the challenges this situation poses is social. The reason why TB once tended to evoke a blasé response from the opinion-making classes had to do with class. TB was always seen as a disease of the poor. Conventional understanding was that the TB bacteria was more or less omnipresent—the majority of us were infected, but the deleterious effects would show only when our immunity systems were severely compromised. In India, that typically happened with malnutrition; globally, it was HIV patients who were particularly susceptible on that front. But while the cluster of proximate causes still bears a linear equation with poverty, TB is seen to have breached the class barrier. Among the reasons: a generalised lowering of immunity because of new urban ways of living, including poor dietary habits.

There are two related facts most people have not quite awoken to. One, that TB can be extremely infectious and goes through much the same pattern of asymptomatic carriers infecting others in conducive social situations. This is not to mention the 64 per cent TB-symptomatic individuals between 2019 and 2021 who did not seek healthcare, living with what they thought was common cough and not going beyond the usual over-the-counter drugs. Two, pulmonary TB—the prototypical sort that affects the lungs—is not the only type. This bacteria can take up residence in any part of the human body: liver, kidney, spine, even brain. And each makes for its own special kind of complication.

The other is the birth of mutations, and the human culpability on that front. The chief problem here is that the TB bacteria is an extremely tenacious one that can hold out against a long siege. Treatment is usually a long and torturous process, involving often months of the strictest

multi-drug regimen. All a patient has to do is miss one dose somewhere—which most often happens when people let down their guards once they feel better—and the bacteria adapts to that particular combo-drug fusillade. The only option then is to move to even more harsh medication.

**S**enior Associate Editor Sonali Acharjee's cover story this week maps out the new dangers of MDR and XDR TB. Architect Debshree Lokhande of Pune presents before us the unnerving set of complications that can arise for patients. By the time it was discovered that her TB strain was able to withstand three of four drugs in the standard drug ensemble, she had lost one lung. The treatment moved up to the then-new experimental drug bedaquiline, and it took three excruciating years of physical struggle and severe side-effects—loss of hearing, for one—before she was back on her feet. This is the ambient danger for everyone: this mutant bacteria will be among a whole cohort that are at large, all of them fortified through the same trap-escape-mutation cycle. This class of drug-resistant bacteria looms in our

midst as an amorphous superfoe that needs only a slight lapse in our defences to get ahead of us. So the goalpost, by definition, is a shifting one: the next patient is perhaps being infected by a newer mutant. And some 56 per cent of them are undiagnosed and 64 per cent untreated: they are moving around in public spaces amidst us.

In an endeavour to bolster its defences, India has set itself a stern challenge. In 2018, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced that the country would strive to eradicate tuberculosis by 2025, five years ahead of the United Nations target of 2030. Fortunately, the system was alive to the dangers of taking the eyes off the ball on

account of Covid-19, and put in place a Rapid Response Plan that ensured the National TB Elimination Programme (NTEP) stayed on course through the turbulence caused by the Covid first and second waves. The total number of TB patients notified during those years—19,33,381 in 2021 as compared to 16,28,161 in 2020—demonstrated the keenness of this vigil.

More recently, while inaugurating the One World TB Summit in Varanasi this March, Modi reiterated the government's resolve to eliminate the scourge in the next two years. As many as 250,000 gram panchayats will be brought in as the advance guard in this grim battle. The overall numbers suggest the 2025 deadline will be difficult to keep, but the scaling up of the fortress walls is by itself salutary. And because India is a hotspot, on its success will hinge the larger objective of global TB eradication. So, in the next two years India should redouble its efforts to ensure that it's rid of this modern-day plague.



June 26, 2017

(Aroon Purie)



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## TB: THE NEW DANGERS

Drug-resistant tuberculosis is becoming an impediment to India's goal of wiping out the disease by 2025. What more do we need to do?

Illustration by NILANJAN DAS

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Cover by NILANJAN DAS



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G

## BLAST FORCE

The site of the IED blast at Aranpur in Dantewada, Chhattisgarh, that killed 10 security personnel on Apr. 26

CHHATTISGARH MAOIST ATTACK

# THE PRICE OF COMPLACENCY

By **Rahul Noronha**

**A**fter a gap of almost four years, a major Maoist attack took place in Dantewada in South Chhattisgarh, where left-wing extremists triggered an improvised explosive device (IED) on April 26, killing 10 security personnel and their civilian driver. While bigger and deadlier incidents have rocked Chhattisgarh in the past, the April 26

incident corresponded with claims by the security establishment—perhaps resulting from a lull in violence—that Maoism was on its last legs in the state.

What really happened on April 26? From their Dantewada district headquarters, a party of District Reserve Guard (DRG)—a state force raised for anti-Maoist operations—and Chhattisgarh Armed Force (CAF) personnel left

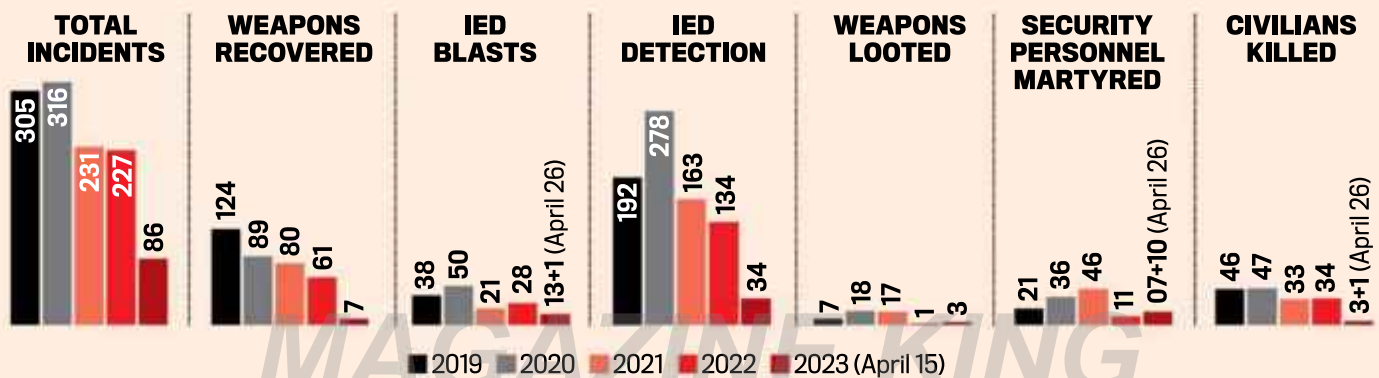
for Aranpur in the intervening night of April 25 and 26 after receiving specific inputs on Maoist presence. Around 6.30 a.m., an engagement took place between Maoists and security forces at Aranpur. Two Maoist Jan Militia (part-time workers of the outlawed CPI-Maoist) members—Lakhma Kawasi and Kosa Madvi, both residents of Sukma district—were arrested. Madvi





**SUPREME SACRIFICE**  
Chhattisgarh CM Bhupesh Baghel and others carry the coffin of a security personnel killed in the IED blast

## MAOIST ACTIVITY IN BASTAR IN RECENT YEARS



was injured. They were being taken back by security forces to Dantewada for arrest formalities and treatment in a pick-up truck, which was leading the three-vehicle convoy, when an IED exploded, completely destroying the vehicle in the middle and killing all 11 people on board. There were numerous road blocks set up en route by locals, mostly children, to demand donations for aama pandum, a tribal agriculture festival. The road blocks slowed down the convoy and their role in the tragic incident cannot be ruled out.

The details of the incident are key to understanding how complacency on the part of those who plan security movements can have bloody outcomes. For one, security experts feel that the convoy should not have moved back during daytime. "Force extraction is done at night as that considerably reduces the risk of vehicles being caught in IED blasts, as visibility is lower. Also, motor bikes are to be preferred over vehicles that carry

### DRG MEN HAVE GREAT TERRAIN KNOWLEDGE, BUT OFTEN DON'T FOLLOW PROCEDURES, SAY SENIOR OFFICERS

more personnel, so casualties can be minimised in case of an explosion," says a senior police officer formerly in charge of anti-Maoist operations. Secondly, the police claim that demining of the road was done but the way an IED—perhaps planted deep under the surface—escaped detection speaks of some basic inadequacy in surveilling methods. Preliminary investigation suggests preparations for the IED was made two months ago. The wire attached to the explosive was laid two-three inches below the ground and grass had grown on

it. The wire trailed into the forest by the road for around 150 metres. The Maoists seemed to have used 'foxholes'—tunnels dug from the side of the road to right below the black top—which is packed with earth and left for later use. As the time for an attack draws near, explosives are placed under the road using the foxhole. In the past, surrendered Maoist cadres have told the police about tunnels, the detection of which helped save many lives.

Five of the 10 security personnel killed were surrendered Maoists who had joined the DRG. While DRG personnel, mostly from a tribal background, have great knowledge of the terrain and have proven to be formidable fighters in face-offs with Maoists, most senior officers acknowledge that the force does have a discipline issue. It is reflected in the reluctance to follow procedures and drills, which can have deadly consequences. DRG personnel therefore need to be closely monitored throughout an operation, for which presence of senior



officers is a must.

What does the general trend in Maoist violence in the last few years reveal? It is true that Chhattisgarh has registered a drop in attacks, but there has also been a corresponding drop in operations by forces. The security establishment also cites the expansion of security personnel camps in Sukma and Bijapur districts, in territories hitherto considered to be under Maoist control. The road from Dantewada to Arampur has more than half a dozen security camps and the Arampur police station is located barely a kilometer from the blast site, which itself is on a state highway. All these factors suggest the Maoists have the capacity to regroup and attack.

“We will intensify the fight against Maoists. This fight is in its last stages. Around 75 security camps have been set up in core Maoist areas. Development work has led to better access to core Maoist areas by security personnel,” said Chhattisgarh chief minister Bhupesh Baghel, while speaking to the media at a wreath-laying ceremony for the martyred personnel at Dantewada. Baghel added that while earlier Maoists attacked security camps, security forces are now taking the fight to the Maoists in their jungle bastions.

However, the BJP describes Baghel’s statement as an “unfortunate” bit of whitewashing. “There was a time when people lived in fear of Maoists both in the Bastar and Surguja divisions, but the previous government had changed things in favour of civilians,” says former CM Raman Singh. Elections are due in the state at the end of the year, so his claim to have cleared at least north Chhattisgarh (that is, Surguja) of the Maoist problem has self-evident propaganda value.

The last major incident involving the loss of lives of security personnel in Dantewada was in April 2019, in the run-up to the Lok Sabha elections, when BJP MLA Bhima Mandavi was killed in an IED blast. The latest attack clearly shows that in the fight against Maoism, security forces can only lower their guard at their own, great peril. ■

# MAYA LOBS A GOOGLY

By Prashant Srivastava

**O**n April 24, when Bihar chief minister Nitish Kumar came to meet Samajwadi Party (SP) president Akhilesh Yadav in Lucknow as part of his efforts to push for Opposition unity, he did not meet Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) supremo Mayawati. Since meeting one former CM of Uttar Pradesh and not the other seemed to leave an obvious gap in his quest, journalists quizzed Nitish about it, but he chose to remain silent. Sources close to them claim that it was in fact ‘Behanji’, as the BSP chief is popularly known, who was reluctant to meet the Bihar CM.

Mayawati’s strategy—more of a dilemma, in this case—is now out in the open. She cannot be seen

standing with a united Opposition that has the SP as its key constituent at a time her party is eyeing the latter’s key voter base to turn its own electoral fortunes. The SP counts Muslims, who comprise nearly 20 per cent of the state’s population, as a core support group besides its natural Yadav base. And the BSP wants to spoil this delicate equation: it has fielded 11 Muslim mayoral candidates out of the 17 who are contesting the two-phase municipal corporation elections (May 4 and 11) in the state.

The BSP chief, who earlier unsuccessfully tried to forge a Dalit-Brahmin unity, claims that leaders

## TOUCHING BASE

Mayawati at an Ambedkar Jayanti event in Lucknow, April 14

ANI





of “communal” and “casteist” parties in UP are having “sleepless nights” as she has given “proper representation” to Muslims in the urban local body polls. In her statement, she also appealed to voters to pay more attention to their “own interests” and be wary of “conspiracies” being hatched by her opponents. “The BSP is an Ambedkarite party,” she added, “which follows the principles of *sarvajan hitay* and *sarvajan sukhay* (everyone’s welfare and happiness).”

Mayawati’s gambit has set the alarm bells ringing in the SP camp. “We were miles ahead of the BSP in the assembly elections last year,” says a senior SP leader, on the condition of anonymity, “but the kind of ticket distribution they [BSP] have done for the civic body polls could hamper our chances in minority-dominated seats.” The BSP has fielded Muslim mayoral can-

## MAYAWATI’S MUSLIM OUTREACH HAS SET THE ALARM BELLS RINGING IN THE SP CAMP THAT COUNTS ON THE MINORITY VOTE

didates in Mathura, Saharanpur, Prayagraj, Moradabad, Meerut, Shahjahanpur, Bareilly, Aligarh and Ghaziabad besides Lucknow, which is reserved for women, and Firozabad, which is reserved for OBC women. Eight of these cities are in western UP, where Muslims are in excess of 25 per cent of the population.

Thus, any tilt towards the BSP—in a triangular fight that also has the ruling BJP in the running—could spell trouble for the SP by cutting into its Muslim votes, notes Dr Shilp Shikha Singh, a Lucknow-based political analyst. “The BSP is playing the role of the BJP’s B-team,” alleges the SP leader quoted earlier. “The bigger challenge for us is to convey this message to the minorities, so they don’t waste their ballot on the BSP.” As for Mayawati, the challenge is to make a success of her new Dalit-Muslim unity pitch in the three-tier municipal polls, considered to be the semifinals ahead of the 2024 parliamentary elections. ■

# FROM SALEM TO SOMNATH

By Jumana Shah

A millennium-old connection was revived recently when Saurashtra Tamils visited the old homeland they had migrated from centuries ago, and took in its wonders. Kicked off in mid-April by defence minister Rajnath Singh in the temple town of Somnath, some 5,000 visitors, who still hold on to their customs and even speak a version of Gujarati called Saurashtri, visited the state as part of the Saurashtra-Tamil Sangamam, a quasi-political programme organised by the Gujarat government, between April 17-27.

The genesis of the ‘sanga-mam’ event is an important slice of forgotten history. Between 1000 and 1024 AD, Turkish invader Mahmud of Ghazni plundered the temple town Somnath 17 times. To escape the violence, several local communities migrated from Prabhas-Patan in the coastal peninsula of Saurashtra, which comprises 13 districts. These communities, mainly from the silk-weaving communities, travelled south from Surat to Devagiri in present-day Daulatabad in Maharashtra which was then under the Yadava kings. They lived there for two centuries, but had to move again after another invader, Alauddin Khilji, laid waste to that northern Deccan kingdom in 1296. They next moved to the Vijayanagara empire in the south. On the invitation of the Nayak rulers (1529-1736), some members of the community moved further south to Madurai in modern-day Tamil Nadu. Some families also settled in Salem, Tanjore and Paramakkudi. In Karnataka,



▲ **WELCOME** Saurashtrian Tamil guests dance with local artists at Veraval rail station, Gir Somnath district, Apr. 17

they first settled in Srirangapattinam on the invitation of Mysore’s ruler Hyder Ali. These families are now settled in Bengaluru. In Andhra Pradesh, a section of the community is settled in Tirupati and have possibly spread to neighbouring towns and cities. Because they were involved in the business of weaving silk, making garments and the silk trade, they were largely engaged with the royal kingdoms of the time. After



the fall of these royal dynasties, they spread out to various trades and businesses and now form a successful and influential section of society. Over the centuries, these communities merged with the local Brahmins. Today, they are called Saurashtri Brahmins, and have taken local names and customs,

to the holy land of Somnath. As chief minister, Narendra Modi had invited the Saurashtri community to Saurashtra University in Rajkot in 2006 and rekindled the connection,” he explains.

The *sangamam* event is part of the ‘Ek Bharat, Shreshtha Bharat’ campaign of the central government which

ing a sense of belonging to Gujarat, a hint of *asmita* (pride) and appealing to the Saurashtra aspect of their identity could be useful in making inroads into the Dravidian heartland. Though not significant in numbers, the Saurashtri community is considered influential in business and trade. Roadshows were held in Chennai, Madurai, Dindigul, Paramakkudi, Salem, Kumbakonam, Thanjavur and Trichy to invite them to Saurashtra. These cities are reportedly home to 1.2 million Saurashtrians.

“A visit to the Somnath temple and the ancestral land, along with other tourism destinations in the state, will hopefully set off a word-of-mouth goodwill campaign about the Gujarat model of development, which is synonymous with the BJP,” says a party spokesperson in Gujarat. Party workers in the respective districts were mobilised in huge numbers to interact with the visitors. The ensuing scenes were both heartwarming and amusing, as the visitors got emotional about reconnecting with their ancestors and the stories they have heard. At the same time, many of them were unable to communicate with the locals as the latter couldn’t understand Saurashtri, and the visitors from Tamil Nadu didn’t know much Hindi either. This left both sides fumbling with English as the only common language.

In 1947, after Independence, Kathiawar, as Saurashtra is also called, became an separate state. It is documented that a delegation of Saurashtra Tamils visited Saurashtra in 1949, but who exactly they visited is not known. However, since then the connection had been lying dormant, till Modi revived it in 2006. The *sangamam* saw a constant stream of visitors at other temple towns like Dwarka and Girnar too, along with tourist hotspots like the Gir wildlife sanctuary and Statue of Unity etc., the blazing heat of Gujarat notwithstanding. In fact, the people were brought to Gujarat on a special train. As per a schedule, local government officials treated the visitors as state guests. One of the visitors, K.V. Mahalaxmi from Madurai, summed it up, “We did not even dream that we would be able to come here ever. It means a lot that today we are on our ancestral land.” ■



PTI

but retain their culture, traditions and, distinctly, the Saurashtri language.

Saurashtri falls under the umbrella of Gujarati, but is nothing like the modern language. Over the past thousand years, Gujarati has taken words from Urdu, Arabic, Parsi, Turkish, Portuguese and English. The emigre Saurashtri, on the other hand, with a more archaic form of Prakrit as its base, has naturally absorbed influences from Marathi, Kannada, Telugu and Tamil. It is now an independent language with a script of its own.

Gujarat government spokesperson Rushikesh Patel says the population of Saurashtris in Tamil Nadu and other states is over 2.5 million. “They belong

## THE SANGAMAM IS OFFICIALLY TO CONNECT SAURASHTRA TAMILS WITH THEIR HOMELAND BUT IT COULD REAP POLITICAL BENEFITS TOO

celebrates the unity in diversity motto. While the event is to highlight the “age-old connections of the two coastal states”, there are of course political benefits to be reaped. Despite a majority of Tamil Nadu’s population being Hindu, the BJP is finding it difficult to penetrate the state politically. Ignit-



MAHARASHTRA/NCP

# THE PAWAR CUT THAT ISN'T?

By Dhaval Kulkarni

In what is seen as a battle of wits with nephew Ajit Pawar, Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) chief Sharad Pawar dropped a bombshell on May 2, saying he intends to quit as party president. The announcement, at the launch of an updated edition of his biography, comes at a time when Ajit is said to be in talks with the BJP, leading to a flux within the NCP.

Though Ajit vehemently denies the reports, sources say things could pick up pace after the Karnataka assembly election and the Supreme Court verdict on the cases regarding the June 2022 change of guard in Maharashtra, where Eknath Shinde and his band of rebels toppled the Maharashtra Vikas Aghadi (MVA) coalition of which the NCP was a part. An NCP group feeling the heat from the central investigation agencies is said to be eager to switch sides, with the effort being led by a national leader.

Pawar Sr's move is said to be an attempt to galvanise his forces and show Ajit who the boss is in the NCP. Alternatively, Pawar may be letting his nephew take over the reins in a détente to keep the NCP together. So, if the NCP decides to break ranks with the MVA, an emeritus status will help insulate him from responsibility. Pawar could even take the line that he is taking a 'democratic position', going with the wishes of the majority.

"Today, I have decided to step down as NCP president," said Pawar, taking the audience by surprise, adding that he would complete his Rajya Sabha term but would not contest elections in the future. The 82-year-old

said that a panel of senior NCP leaders including Ajit, daughter Supriya Sule, Praful Patel, Sunil Tatkare and others would decide on the new party chief.

This led to immediate mayhem, with party leaders and workers thronging the dais and imploring Pawar to take back his decision even as he, flanked by wife Pratibha, sat almost sphinx-like on stage. NCP leaders like former minister and state president Jayant Patil even broke down. "In Maharashtra, we all seek votes in the name of Pawar *saheb*. The party gets votes due to him. If Pawar *saheb* steps aside, how will we face the people?" Patil asked, his voice quaking.

However, among all this there was one dissenting voice—Ajit. While his uncle was being beseeched, he

**SHARAD PAWAR'S MOVE IS SAID TO BE AN ATTEMPT TO STIR UP HIS FORCES, SHOW NEPHEW AJIT WHO THE BOSS IS IN THE NCP**

asked those present to respect Pawar's decision. When Baramati MP Sule was asked to speak, Ajit promptly hushed her as her "*motha bhau* (elder brother)". "There is no need to be emotional. This was going to happen at some point," said Ajit, while revealing that Pawar had initially planned to make the announcement on May 1, but had postponed it by a day due to the MVA alliance meeting in Mumbai. In his



**THE QUITTING GAME** Ajit Pawar tries to calm party workers after Pawar Sr (centre) made his announcement

trademark brusque style, Ajit snapped at people and, on one occasion, when a party worker threatened to launch a fast in protest, Ajit retorted: "Do it... *barik hoshil* (you will lose weight)!"

However, the chorus for Pawar Sr to withdraw his decision continued, making it evident that Ajit may be isolated in the party, at least for now. In fact, NCP functionaries across districts in Maharashtra began resigning from party posts in a move to persuade Pawar to reconsider. Ajit later told the media that Pawar had agreed to rethink his decision.

A senior Congress leader and former minister said this wasn't merely a leadership transition issue but a deeper "internal power struggle" with Sharad Pawar playing "emotional politics" to isolate Ajit. He felt the party would now "rally behind Pawar, showing Ajit who was the boss".

Such moves by Pawar have paid off in the past. In 2019, after the Enforcement Directorate (ED) booked



# DEADLY BUSINESS

By Amitabh Srivastava

**O**n March 16, shortly after 13-year-old Tushar, a Class 6 student, went missing from his house in Patna's Kanhauli village, his father, Raj Kishore Pandit, received a ransom call on WhatsApp. The kidnapper wanted Pandit, a government schoolteacher, to pay up Rs 40 lakh for the safe return of his son. Three days later, police recovered the boy's charred body from a secluded spot and arrested the alleged perpetrator—Mukesh Pandey, 28, who ran a coaching centre and private school in the same locality.

Police claim Pandey, con-



Pawar for alleged money-laundering in the Maharashtra State Cooperative Bank (MSCB) case, he turned that into political capital by taking an aggressive stand and threatening to visit the agency's office in connection with the probe. This led to the ED backing off and sympathy for Pawar in rural Maharashtra and among voters of the dominant Maratha community, where he has a base. Later, when the victory of the BJP-Shiv Sena alliance in the state assembly polls seemed a foregone conclusion, Pawar, then 79 and a cancer survivor, led a spirited fightback, even addressing a public meeting in pouring rain at Satara.

"As long as he is in good health, Pawar will never step down from a leadership role...Ajit is being isolated gradually. Eventually, Pawar may withdraw his resignation or choose Sule as his successor. If he emerges stronger from this episode, he may eventually even replace Ajit as the

leader of Opposition with a confidante like Jayant Patil," a Congress leader explains. "The ambitions of Ajit and his team were becoming a problem for Pawar... even a team player gets upset when he has no unconditional support from the party," says another Congress leader. He feels that Sule could even be chosen as the NCP national working president.

Senior leaders of the Shiv Sena (Uddhav Balasaheb Thackeray) too have thoughts on the same lines. "*Pawar khunta halwun balkat kartahet* (Pawar is shaking the nail to embed it deeper)," says one of them, using a phrase many leaders have used to describe Pawar's moves.

Senior journalist Nikhil Wagle describes the move as a "Pawar googly for Ajit...such shock therapies are part of his politics". Wagle feels that Pawar could be aiming at installing Sule as his successor while controlling the party from behind the scenes. The question is, will Ajit accept this? ■

## EXORBITANT INTEREST RATES CHARGED BY ILLEGAL LENDERS ARE DRIVING BORROWERS TO DESPAIR AND CRIME IN BIHAR

fronted by private moneylenders from whom he had borrowed Rs 20 lakh, found an easy target in his former student Tushar, who unsuspectingly accompanied the accused only to be strangled to death, his body later burnt to hide evidence. Pandey then allegedly started sending ransom messages to Pandit using Tushar's phone. When nabbed on March 19, say police, he was still carrying his victim's phone.

The vicious circle of debt owing to exorbitant interest rates charged by private moneylenders in Bihar (at times as high as 10 per cent per month) has often brought out the worst in the bor-



rowers, and Pandey's is yet another case in point. The latest *Crime in India* report of the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) records as many as 452 murders for 'financial gain' in Bihar in 2021. This was 27 per cent of such murders reported across the country (1,692) that year. A senior IPS officer posted in the state suggests that a good number of these murders could be directly linked to moneylending.

**T**here was a time when Bihar was infamous for its *gunda* banks, run by groups of thugs who had transformed the older forms of usurious moneylending into a full-blown extortion racket to trap gullible borrowers. Over the years, however, the improved law and order situation, or at least the perception of it, drove most of these elements out of business. But the lucrative earning opportunities spawned a new crop of first-time moneylenders. The debutants to this grey art came from varied backgrounds. Take a milk seller in the backward district of Nawada, one of whose borrowers, overwhelmed by the mounting interest, ended his life by suicide along with his wife and four children in November last year. Or a beauty parlour owner in the upscale Boring Road locality of Patna, who was kidnapped and shot dead by her borrower in November 2021.

According to revenue minister Alok Mehta, only banks and licensed private finance companies can lend money. But in a state like Bihar where the credit-deposit ratio maintained by banks is as low as 53 per cent—that is, a bank loans just over a rupee to customers for every two rupees received in deposits—unregistered private moneylenders have mushroomed in its rural pockets to fill the wide gap between the supply and demand of credit. According to rough estimates, Bihar has more than 5,000 illegally operating private creditors, who have created a Rs 10,000 crore worth of

## MONEY DISPUTES IN BIHAR



## MURDERS OVER MONEY DISPUTES



Source: Bihar State Crime Records Bureau

## MURDERS FOR FINANCIAL GAIN (in 2021)



Source: National Crime Records Bureau

moneylending business. The loans are sought for meeting the usual occupational and personal exigencies—from purchasing farm inputs, such as seeds and fertilisers, to arranging a daughter's wedding or meeting health and educational needs in the family.

Not only is the institutional credit system unable to meet the demand, taking a loan from banks is also a slow and cumbersome ordeal. "When it comes to private moneylenders, the loan processing is quick, and often without any deadline for repayment," explains advocate K.D. Mishra, who practises in the Patna High Court. And

this is the trap into which many gullible people have fallen to meet their urgent cash requirements. High interest rates have become a norm in this unregulated sector, with the annual rates varying anywhere between 48 and 60 per cent, depending upon the customer, nature of the loan, repayment period, and collateral. As most borrowers struggle to meet the repayment obligation, the interest amount multiplies beyond their capacity. Some flee, others resort to suicide while a few like Pandey think they can wriggle out of this debt trap by committing crime.

The state crime records bureau's report sheds some more light on this dark underbelly of the unorganised lending market. According to the latest figures, on an average, two cases of 'money dispute' were registered every three days and one person killed due to such disputes in the state in 2021. In fact, the number of such cases has been on a constant rise, indicating a disturbing trend. From 184 money dispute cases registered in 2019, the number went up to 234 in 2020 and touched 240 in 2021. (The report for 2022 has not been released yet.) Entering into 2021, 1,491 such cases were stuck at various stages in Bihar courts, the report states further. By the end of the year, the backlog had gone up to 1,632 with 154 fresh ones put on trial but only 13 reaching their logical conclusion. This, even as only those cases reach courts where either a very large amount is involved or both the lender and borrower have "matching clout", claims Mishra. And that systemic delay may be pushing people to take the law into their own hands.

To end this cycle of crime, it's time the state government cracks down on illegal moneylending. But treating just the symptom, and not the disease, may prove to be counterproductive. For, first, there is a need to strengthen the institutional credit system and take it to even the remotest parts of Bihar. ■



**BLUE LABEL**

The Water Metro's electric boat leaves the Vypeen jetty



# A UNIQUE WATER MARK

ANI

**By Jeemon Jacob**

**P**rime Minister Narendra Modi made another whirlwind trip to Kerala in the last week of April where he flagged off two pathbreaking projects, the state's first Vande Bharat semi-high speed express train and the inland Water Metro. The latter is an integrated ferry transport system which will cater to the Greater Kochi region.

The business capital of Kerala is the first city in India to get this unique traffic commuter facility. Some 10 islands on the outer reaches of its coastal archipelago, slung along a complicated map of estuaries and backwaters and hence a logistical headache in terms of road commute, will be connected. Doing the honours will be a fleet of 78 battery-operated electric hybrid boats, flitting to and fro between 38 terminals with intelligent navigation systems, on 15 routes that together span about 78 km.

The Rs 1,137 crore project impressed in its first ride on April 25. Among the first passengers were a number of disabled children and their parents who travelled from Vypeen to the High Court jetty on the mainland.

While launching the project, PM Modi extolled the Kerala government initiative to introduce a ferry service which is eco-friendly and a viable answer to the traffic chaos in Kochi.

Chief minister Pinarayi Vijayan expressed hope on the occasion that the novel initiative would contribute to the development of the tourism sector in Kerala. The project, executed by Kerala Metro Rail Ltd and partly funded through an €85 million (Rs 763.1 crore) loan from the Indo-German Financial Corporation will be completed by 2035. In the first phase, operations have started in two sectors—the Vypeen-High Court and Vytilla-Kakkanad routes.

The greater Kochi metropolitan area, where 10 per cent of Kerala's 33.4 million population lives, has been

dogged with traffic chaos for a very long time now. The Kochi Metro Rail started operations in June 2017, but traffic woes continue to haunt the city. That situation may be alleviated to some extent by the water ferry. "It will transform Kochi into a better living space. It's a safe, modern means of transport offering better connectivity to remote islanders with the cheapest possible fares," says Prof. K.V. Thomas, former MP and now special representative of the Kerala government in New Delhi. The air-conditioned boats can seat about 50-100 and are expected to carry 34,000 people daily when the first phase is complete. Ticket prices start at Rs 20 and go up to Rs 40. Commuters certainly seem to have taken a fancy to it. Less than a week after operations started, daily ridership had already crossed the 10,000 mark.

"We are thrilled with the response from the people. Kochi Water Metro has shown India how the state can provide world-class facilities to city-dwellers and ease their commuting woes, especially since a single Metro fare payment integrates travel by both boat and train," says Loknath Behera, CEO of Kochi Rail Metro Ltd and its subsidiary, Water Metro Ltd.





## KOCHI HAS WELCOMED THE WATER METRO. DAILY RIDERSHIP CROSSED THE 10,000 MARK IN LESS THAN A WEEK

The timely completion of the project was a challenge for the team. The Water Metro team had to wait two years to get a green signal from Coastal Regulation Zone Authority to build jetties even after submitting a detailed plan. Again, operational challenges and then the Covid delayed execution. “I’m happy that we have finally made a breakthrough and become the star attraction of Kochi. We have also tailored local transport facilities to suit the commuters,” added Behera.

**S**tate tourism minister Mohammed Riyas says he is sure that the Water Metro would be a big boost tourism prospects in and around Kochi. “No country in Asia has linked remote islands and in such a long stretch. The Kerala government is planning to introduce a similar facility in Kuttanad connecting Alappuzha,” Riyas told INDIA TODAY.

The Metro authorities are also seeking the support of private players in sharing the cost of building new boats and jetties to reduce the project cost. Many corporates have already come forward to support the initiative as it gives them great visibility. The island people too have welcomed the new service as it has reduced their travel time by half. Vypeen resident Sheela Joy says, “We are really happy that the Water Metro has become a reality. It’s already very popular and, in fact, they should extend timings and operate from 5 a.m. to 11 p.m. It gives a classic feel of travelling in the backwaters.”

The extension of Water Metro services to other parts of Kerala, especially the central and southern parts, could become a gamechanger in eco-friendly and cost-effective commuting. When fully operational, experts say it could reduce greenhouse gas emissions by at least 16,500 tonnes annually. ■



NIKHIL TIWARI

### WRESTLERS' PROTEST

# FIGHT TO THE FINISH

By Prashant Srivastava

**T**he untimely rains in the national capital have failed to douse the anger of the country’s top wrestlers who have been staging a most dramatic protest at Jantar Mantar since April 23. In many ways, it’s the fight of their lives. Even as the Delhi Police on April 28—following the Supreme Court’s intervention—registered two FIRs of sexual harassment against Wrestling Federation of India (WFI) president and six-time Lok Sabha MP Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh, the grapplers say they won’t give up till he is arrested. A Bharatiya Janata Party MP from Uttar

Pradesh’s Kaiserganj parliamentary seat, Brij Bhushan is accused of sexually harassing seven women wrestlers, including a minor.

Since May 1, the protest site has seen a quick makeover given the change in Delhi’s weather. Mattresses on which the protesters and their supporters used to sleep have now been put away. A makeshift cover of tarpaulin sheets has come up to shield those who continue to spend night after night at Jantar Mantar. Even as the number of supporters has dwindled, owing both to the rain and appeals made to them to return home, many continue





MANISH RAJPUT

**THE TAKEDOWN** Wrestlers Bajrang Punia, Vinesh Phogat and Sakshi Malik during the protest against federation chief Brij Bhushan Singh (left) at Jantar Mantar, Apr. 28

to stand in solidarity with the wrestlers, who are led by Commonwealth and Asian Games gold medallist Vinesh Phogat and Olympics bronze medallists Sakshi Malik and Bajrang Punia.

It was tough to stand up against powerful people, says Vinesh, and "appealing to the public was the only avenue left" after no action was taken despite repeated appeals to the authorities. In fact, the wrestlers had first launched a sit-in at Jantar Mantar on January 18, but it was called off soon after a meeting with Union sports minister Anurag Thakur, who ordered the constitution of an oversight committee to probe the allegations. Even though the panel submitted its report in the first week of April, its contents were not made public. Amid reports that it gave Brij Bhushan a clean chit and the WFI announcing its election for May 7 (later declared "null and void" by the sports ministry), the wrestlers decided to return to the protest site.

Brij Bhushan, who has remained ensconced on the WFI president's chair for three terms now, had said that he won't be contesting the election again. Talking to mediapersons at his residence in Gonda on April 30, he refused to resign from the post though. "Resigning as the president of the Wrestling Federation of India is not a big deal for me," he said, "but I will not do it as a criminal." Terming the protest a conspiracy hatched by a Congress leader and a top wrestler, Brij Bhushan claimed he has an audio clip to prove his allegation and will hand it over to the Delhi Police "when the time comes". "I am ready to face any kind of investigation... I am completely innocent and have full faith in the Supreme Court and Delhi Police," added the BJP leader.

But for Brij Bhushan, this is not the first brush with controversies. From being

named as an accused in the 1992 Babri Masjid demolition case to spending time in the Tihar jail in the mid-'90s for allegedly harbouring gangster Dawood Ibrahim's men involved in a shootout, the *bahubali* politician holds sway in the Awadh region of northeastern UP and has the capacity to influence results in six to eight Lok

## Protesting wrestlers say they won't leave Jantar Mantar till the six-time MP and WFI chief Brij Bhushan is arrested for alleged sexual harassment of women grapplers

Sabha seats. Though he got a clean chit in both cases, Brij Bhushan still has four cases pending against him, including on the charges of attempt to murder and robbery, his election affidavit reveals. Add to that a murder to avenge an associate's killing, to which he unabashedly confessed in a video interview with *The Lallantop* last year. Besides this alleged nexus of crime and politics, Brij Bhushan wields enormous clout via a chain of nearly 50 educational institutes spread across a 100-km belt from Ayodhya to Shravasti. Sources in the BJP say his poll machinery is run almost entirely by this set-up, with his family members playing a key role in both his businesses and political activities, independent of the party.

A law graduate, Brij Bhushan entered student politics in 1985. Considered close to the late Vishva Hindu Parishad chief Ashok Singhal, he went on to join the BJP and came into the limelight during the Ram temple movement. Riding on that wave, he won his first Lok Sabha election from Gonda constituency in 1991. In 2009, sensing the dwindling fortunes of the BJP, he switched to the Samajwadi Party (SP) and won from Kaiserganj. It was SP founder Mulayam Singh Yadav, say sources close to Brij Bhushan, who played an important role in getting him elected as the WFI president in 2011. Even as he returned to the BJP in 2014, Brij Bhushan, sources say, continues to share a "good bond" with the Yadav family and could even go back to the SP if denied the BJP ticket in the 2024 general election.

**W**hile Brij Bhushan is trying to preserve his political capital, those camping at Jantar Mantar are not just dealing with an onslaught of TV crews, bad weather and alleged threats of being sidelined in their careers, they are also struggling to maintain their workout routine. A woman wrestler, who does not wish to be named, says, "Many young wrestlers have abandoned the protest as they are afraid. We cannot afford to miss out on our workout for more than a week. Our whole career depends on it." Those who have stayed on wake up early in the morning and exercise for a few hours before the daily grind begins—giving media interviews, speaking to the public and handling a backlash from friends and family. "We thought people who are close to us would stay by our side, but they are the first to have turned against us," says the wrestler cited above.

So when, on April 27, Indian Olympic Association (IOA) president P.T. Usha was quoted as having suggested that the protesting wrestlers should have shown "some discipline", they were left disappointed. But amid an outpouring in the protesters' favour, both on the ground and online, Usha landed at Jantar Mantar on May 3, reportedly telling the wrestlers that she had been "misinterpreted". Brij Bhushan, too, is banking on the support of his fraternity to tide him over this latest row. The BJP leader categorically praised SP president and former UP chief minister Akhilesh Yadav, who has so far maintained silence on the matter, for "standing with the truth". Meanwhile, politicians reaching Jantar Mantar have been raising questions on the delay in Brij Bhushan's arrest despite the FIRs, including one under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act. With both sides not ready to relent, it looks like a fight to the finish. ■

(With inputs from Sonali Acharjee)



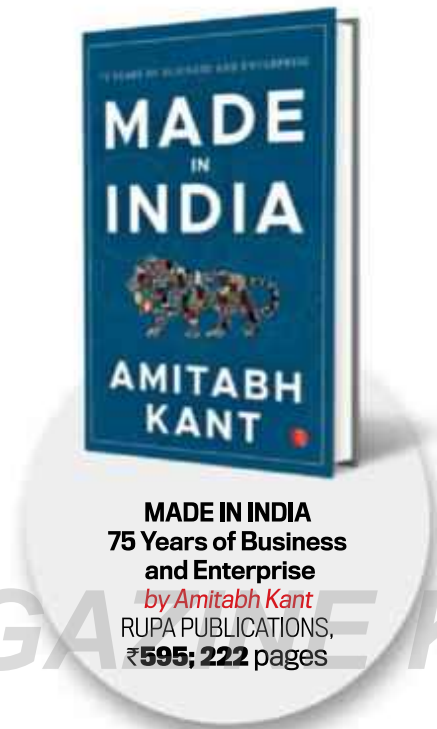
## BOOKS

# REFORMS IN A NUTSHELL

By M.G. Arun

**T**he Narendra Modi government had initiated the Make in India programme as early as 2014, its very first year, with the idea of turning the country into a leading global manufacturing and investment destination. But that wasn't going to be easy. China was still a favourite manufacturing hub for global companies, having greatly improved the quality and scale of its production. However, towards the turn of the decade, a host of events conspired to bring India into the limelight, notably the subsidies war between the US and China, followed by the Covid-19 pandemic. Global manufacturing giants realised the need to further their 'China Plus One' strategy that would insulate their supply chains from disruptions in China. The Modi government plunged right into action to capitalise on this new opportunity. The Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan, launched in May 2022, aimed to create a self-reliant India by fostering its manufacturing capabilities and inviting more global firms to invest here.

There are few better suited to give an insider's account of the reforms in the Modi era than seasoned bureaucrat and G20 Sherpa of India in its presidency year, Amitabh Kant. In his book *Made in India: 75 Years of Business and Enterprise*, Kant first builds the context to these reforms. He dwells on the enterprising quality of India's industrial stalwarts, right from Independence in 1947, as well as major policy decisions that supported them. In that



sense, the book is the perfect anthology of past policies in a nutshell—the initial socialist thrust, the phase of extreme state control or 'Licence Raj', the big turning point of liberalisation, the growth years following the stimulus splurge after the 2008 financial meltdown, the policy paralysis at the end of UPA-2, to the present. Those wanting to take a deep dive into each of these policies need to look elsewhere. That's not Kant's idea in the book.

Kant's narrative is lucid, to the point and bereft of jargon, as he skims from one big policy initiative to another, offering a bird's-eye view of events that shaped our economic history. He is also

optimistic to a fault, a quality those who know him closely wouldn't be surprised by. He offers rare insights into policymaking when he starts talking about the

Modi years, leveraging his access to the PM and two finance ministers—Arun Jaitley and Nirmala Sitharaman. He was secretary to the Department of Industrial Policy and Promotion, and later CEO of Niti Aayog, a post offered to him by Modi when Kant was actually rooting to become chairman of the Competition Commission of India, something which Modi felt he wasn't "cut out" for. Kant's early stints as tourism secretary in Kerala (where he drove the successful God's Own Country campaign) and later as a joint secretary at the Centre (marked by the Incredible India campaign) came in handy during the framing of policies such as Make in India (notably, Modi struck down the idea of an elephant motif for the campaign and suggested a lion, derived from the Ashoka Chakra, instead), the Aspirational Districts programme and Start-Up India, the last of which, he says, helped build "a strong ecosystem for nurturing innovation and entrepreneurship".

The hallmark of the Atmanirbhar initiative is the production-linked incentive (PLI) scheme wherein manufacturing firms, both global and domestic, are incentivised once targets are met. An area where much headway has been made is handset production, with global companies, including Apple Inc., pushing up their assembly of phones in India.

Kant also counts the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code which made it easier to shut down loss-making businesses, the Jan Dhan-Aadhaar-Mobile trinity that helped target subsidies for the poor, Goods and Services Tax, National Infrastructure Pipeline and Unified Payments Interface as big policy successes. The Centre's divestment and asset monetisation policies remain a work in progress. By the time Kant concludes by stressing on future thrust areas like climate change and renewable energy, and frontier technologies such as artificial intelligence, blockchain and drones, he has captured a lot of what is possible in the realm of policymaking, without worrying too much about the equally big challenges. Kant, as always, prefers to see the cup as half full. ■

**AMITABH KANT'S NARRATIVE IS LUCID AND BEREFT OF JARGON, AS HE SKIMS THROUGH MAJOR EVENTS THAT SHAPED OUR ECONOMIC HISTORY**

## BRIMMING BONHOMIE

New Delhi is doing a fine job of walking the diplomatic tightrope on the ongoing Ukraine–Russia war. Even in the face of a sanctions threat from the US, it continues to do business as usual with Russia—indeed, rather more than usual, if you add burgeoning oil imports to the old military trade. For all that, Indo–US relations are going swimmingly well too. PM Narendra Modi and US President Joe Biden will meet at least five times in 2023. First, on the sidelines of the G7 summit at Hiroshima in the third week of May, then at the India-Pacific Island Cooperation Summit in Papua New Guinea on May 22. Two days later, a bilateral is slated after the Quad meet in Sydney. In June, Modi has an official trip to the US. And New Delhi hosts the G20 in September. Will any of this imply a freeze-up with Moscow? Happily, on current form, no.



Illustration by SIDDHANT JUMDE



### A Different Health Checkup

**D**eputy chief minister **Tejashwi Yadav**, who also doubles up as Bihar's health minister, is busy checking the well-being of the state's healthcare facilities. Last September, he started conducting surprise checks on government hospitals—only to be surprised at the state of affairs. Later, he gave his medical mandarins 60 days to improve. On April 30 night, during an inspection at SK Medical College and Hospital, Muzaffarpur, Yadav was faced with the bitter ground realities—from missing doctors to unavailability of medicines. All he could do was promise stern action. But resuscitation may take more than words.



### Politics of Emulation?

**B**JP leaders had drawn parallels between Trinamool Congress national general secretary **Abhishek Banerjee's** Jana Sanjog Yatra and Congress leader Rahul Gandhi's Bharat Jodo Yatra. But they were at their wits' end on April 29. Because, when Banerjee sat down for lunch at a small-time businessman's humble home in West Bengal's Jalpaiguri district—a la BJP heavyweights Amit Shah and J.P. Nadda—comparisons started being made on that side. The Left was out with its barbs in no time. After all, they keep tom-tomming a secret Modi-Didi entente.

### RELIGIOUSLY YOURS

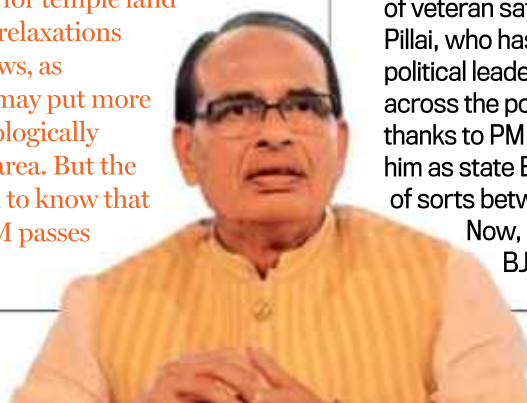
**T**he pressure from the Hindu priest lobby is clearly showing up on the BJP's governments in Uttarakhand and Madhya Pradesh. While Pushkar Singh Dhimi's regime was pushed to remove the cap on the number of vehicles and pilgrims in the Char Dham Yatra, **Shivraj Singh Chouhan** is moving closer to conceding the Vishwa Hindu Parishad's long-standing demand of freeing up temples from government control. For now, he has empowered priests as the deciding authority for temple land auctions. Dhimi's relaxations have raised eyebrows, as excessive footfalls may put more pressure on the ecologically fragile Joshimath area. But the governments seem to know that the way to the EVM passes through temples!

### WRITE CONNECT

**W**riting is not an art of leisure for Goa Governor Dr **P.S. Sreedharan Pillai**.

The release of his 198th book on May 2 in Thiruvananthapuram witnessed an unusual gathering. While the book in Malayalam, *Ente Priya Kadakal* (my beloved stories), was released by chief minister Pinarayi Vijayan, the occasion also marked a meeting of veteran saffronites. The 69-year-old Pillai, who has excelled as a leading lawyer, political leader and writer, has friends across the political spectrum. In a way, thanks to PM Modi, whose decision to drop him as state BJP chief has enabled a bridge of sorts between Kerala's political rivals.

Now, if only it could shore up the BJP's numbers in the state.





**TB**

# **THE NEW DANGERS**

**THE RISE IN THE NUMBER OF CASES AND  
DEATHS DUE TO DRUG-RESISTANT TUBERCULOSIS  
IS PROVING TO BE AN IMPEDIMENT TO INDIA'S  
AMBITION TO END THE DISEASE BY 2025.  
WHAT MORE DO WE NEED TO DO?**

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## DEEPTI CHAVAN

40, Patient Advocate, Mumbai

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### A TERRIFYING DISEASE

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**D**eepthi underwent treatment for Multi-Drug-Resistant tuberculosis (MDR-TB) for six long years. The drugs she was prescribed had extreme side-effects: "One drug, cycloserine, makes you suicidal, irritable...you just lose your mind. The family feels that the patient is doing this because he/she is frustrated, but it's the medicine which makes them behave thus." Another drug, clofazimine, turned her skin dark, and the drastic change in her appearance scared her further. "The side effects of MDR treatment can be gruelling, and only a few patients are properly informed about this. Now, I am trying to provide to others the counselling that I missed out on," she says.





# T

was only natural that India took the lead in hosting the One World TB Summit in Varanasi recently, because the country still has the highest burden of tuberculosis in the world. Not only do we ac-

count for almost a quarter of the total 10 million people afflicted with TB annually, we also lose more than 400,000 people a year to the disease, more than a third of the world's annual toll of 1.4 million. At the venue in Varanasi, Prime Minister Narendra Modi reiterated India's commitment to eliminate TB by 2025, five years ahead of the UN target. He also launched a TB-Mukt Panchayat Initiative to expand the ambit of India's tuberculosis elimination effort down to the last village.

However, despite the flurry of initiatives that the government has launched in recent years, experts remain sceptical of its ambition to eradicate TB entirely in India in the next two years. That is because India now has the dubious distinction of having the highest number of cases of drug-resistant tuberculosis (DR-TB), classified further as Multi-Drug-Resistant (MDR) and Extensively Drug-Resistant (XDR) TB. Both cases and deaths due to DR-TB have been growing rapidly in recent years across the country. According to the World Health Organization, India's count of 119,000 makes up more than 26 per cent of global cases of MDR-TB. "DR-TB is of growing concern in India," acknowledges C. Padmapriyadarsini, director of the ICMR-National Institute for Research in Tuberculosis (NIRT) in Chennai. She red-flags a few key drivers: irregular treatment, delay in approaching a health facility that precludes early and prompt diagnosis, and the discontinuing of medication before its prescribed course ends.

Being afflicted with TB, especially the DR variety, is a fate you wouldn't wish on your worst enemy. Debshree Lokhande, an architect from Pune, was diagnosed with TB in 2014, and immediately put on medicines. But her condition continued to worsen. Doctors found her TB resistant to three of the medicines in the standard four-drug kit. As they struggled to find a medicine that would work, Lokhande's entire left lung was destroyed within just six months, and the other infected as well. Desperate, the family approached a doctor at Hinduja Hospital in Mumbai. Lokhande was prescribed a new set of medications, including bedaquiline, which had just been approved for experimental use in 2014 and which she received on compassionate grounds. It took three years of physical struggle, grappling with severe side-effects such as loss of hearing and the financial burden of getting cochlear implants and TB drugs, for Lokhande to finally turn the corner.

## BURDEN OF TB IN INDIA

# 2.7

**million**

No. of TB patients in India in 2021, a quarter of the 10 million cases worldwide

# 119

**thousand**

No. of MDR-TB cases in India, 26 per cent of global cases, per WHO

# 400

**thousand**

No. of people in India who die of TB every year, nearly a third of the global toll of 1.4 million a year



## WHY IT IS RISING AGAIN

Tuberculosis itself is hardly new in India: it has the world's earliest written record of the disease, from circa 1500 BC. The country's National Tuberculosis Elimination Programme to eradicate this communicable disease has been running for over 50 years now. Once known as a poor man's disease, TB no longer discriminates on the basis of class. Nor is it restricted to the lungs; the bacteria can just as easily settle in the kidneys, brain or spine. Treatment, typically, is in two phases. In the initial phase, a set of four first-line drugs—isoniazid, rifampicin, pyrazinamide and ethambutol—are prescribed for two months. Then comes the continuation phase, in which isoniazid, rifampicin and ethambutol continue for another four months.

Years of antibiotic use and misuse have made the bacteria adept at evading these drugs. According to the National Anti-TB Drug Resistant Survey (DRS) from 2014-16, a quarter of the TB patients in India were resistant to one or the other of these drugs, and 1.3 per cent of these were XDR-TB cases. According to the India TB Report 2023, the number of MDR-TB cases diagnosed in 2022 was 63,801. More specifically, MDR-TB is resistant to isoniazid and rifampicin and XDR-TB is resistant to rifampicin, any fluoroquinolone, and at least one of the three injectable second-line drugs—amikacin, kanamycin or capreomycin. In recent years, DR-TB has begun to be treated with two oral drugs—bedaquiline and delamanid—which are available at government hospitals or at designated private hospitals. These drugs are more effective and have fewer side-effects than the older ones used for DR-TB.

If human ignorance is a factor in the birth of resistant strains, it also plays more than a walk-on part in the spread of this communicable disease—and the toll it continues to exact. Since its only symptom initially is a prolonged cough, many do not know they have TB until it is too late. "If someone has a cough for more than two to three weeks and other problems have been ruled out, then one must look for the possibility of TB," says Dr Sandeep Nayar, head of the chest and respiratory diseases department at the BLK Max Super Specialty Hospital in Delhi. Delay can not only worsen an individual's case, but can also infect others in that time. Pulmonary TB is highly infectious. People with active TB can infect five to 15 people through close contact over the course of a year. The disease spreads through the air when an infected person coughs or speaks. When another person breathes in the bacteria, it settles in the lungs, where it can lie dormant, a stage called latent

ASHIQUE MUHAMMED K



DEB SHREE  
LOKHANDE

35, Architect,  
Pune

## A LONG, PAINFUL BATTLE

**D**ebshree's life changed forever when she was diagnosed with XDR-TB in 2014. By then, three years of incorrect reports and medical advice had already worsened her condition. The tests showed that she was resistant to three of the four drugs in the standard four-drug kit for TB. It was only when Debshree was prescribed bedaquiline on compassionate grounds that she was able to recover. But her treatment was excruciatingly painful. A dreaded side effect was loss of speech and hearing. "This made me

feel even more isolated. My sister was the only one who managed to communicate with me, using sign language," she recalls. What's worse, doctors didn't advise her about the infectiousness of TB, and Lokhande's sister also ended up contracting the disease. Today, though Debshree has been cured completely, there are still some people who avoid meeting her. "I am a committed and outspoken advocate who is sharing her story, so that people are more aware of the realities of the disease," she says.



# A DEADLY BACILLUS

THE CAUSES, SYMPTOMS, DIAGNOSIS AND TREATMENT OF A LETHAL DISEASE THAT HAS ADAPTED TO EVADE CONVENTIONAL DRUGS

Graphic by **TANMOY CHAKRABORTY**; Text by **SONALI ACHARJEE**

## WHAT IS TUBERCULOSIS?



It is a disease caused by the bacteria ***Mycobacterium tuberculosis***. Though it usually affects the lungs, it can also affect other parts of the body, such as the kidney, brain, liver or spine. However, not everyone who has the bacteria in their system develops TB. An infection that doesn't manifest as disease is called 'latent TB'



**Common symptoms** are persistent cough, blood in the sputum, unexplained weight loss, fever and unexplained chills. The disease spreads through the air, when an infected person coughs, speaks or sneezes. Pulmonary TB is the most contagious



When another person breathes in the bacteria, it settles in the lungs, where it can remain latent or multiply. **People with active TB can infect five to 15 people** in close contact within a year

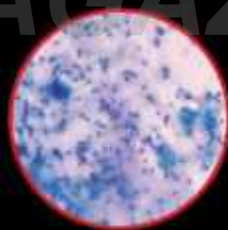
## WHEN DOES TB BECOME DRUG-RESISTANT?



**About a quarter of TB patients** in India have resistance to one or the other TB drug. Wrong duration or dosage of antibiotics turns the bacteria resistant to drugs

**MDR, or Multi-Drug Resistant TB**, is resistant to isoniazid and rifampicin; **XDR or Extensively Drug-Resistant TB** to rifampicin, any fluoroquinolone, and at least one of the three injectible second-line drugs—amikacin, kanamycin or capreomycin

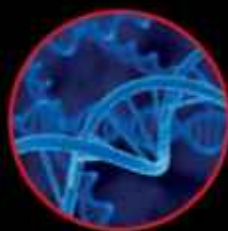
## HOW DO WE DETECT TB?



**Sputum Smear Microscopy:** It's the gold standard test to diagnose TB and uses sputum samples collected from the lungs. Since the illness is caused by slow-growing bacteria, it can take three to eight weeks to yield results, and even longer to confirm drug resistance



**Line-probe Assays:** The first molecular tests recommended by the WHO. They take an average of two days to diagnose TB and resistance to first- and second-line drugs. A fluid sample is taken from the patient's lungs and then tested on strips called 'assays'



**CBNAAT/TrueNat:** In this WHO-endorsed method, sputum or patient samples are checked using the highly specific, sensitive and relatively quicker nucleic-acid amplification tests. They can confirm not just TB but also resistance to rifampicin within two hours

## OTHER TYPES OF TB AND SYMPTOMS

(TB in other parts of the body can exhibit diverse signs, which may or may not be accompanied by traditional symptoms like cough, fever or weight loss)

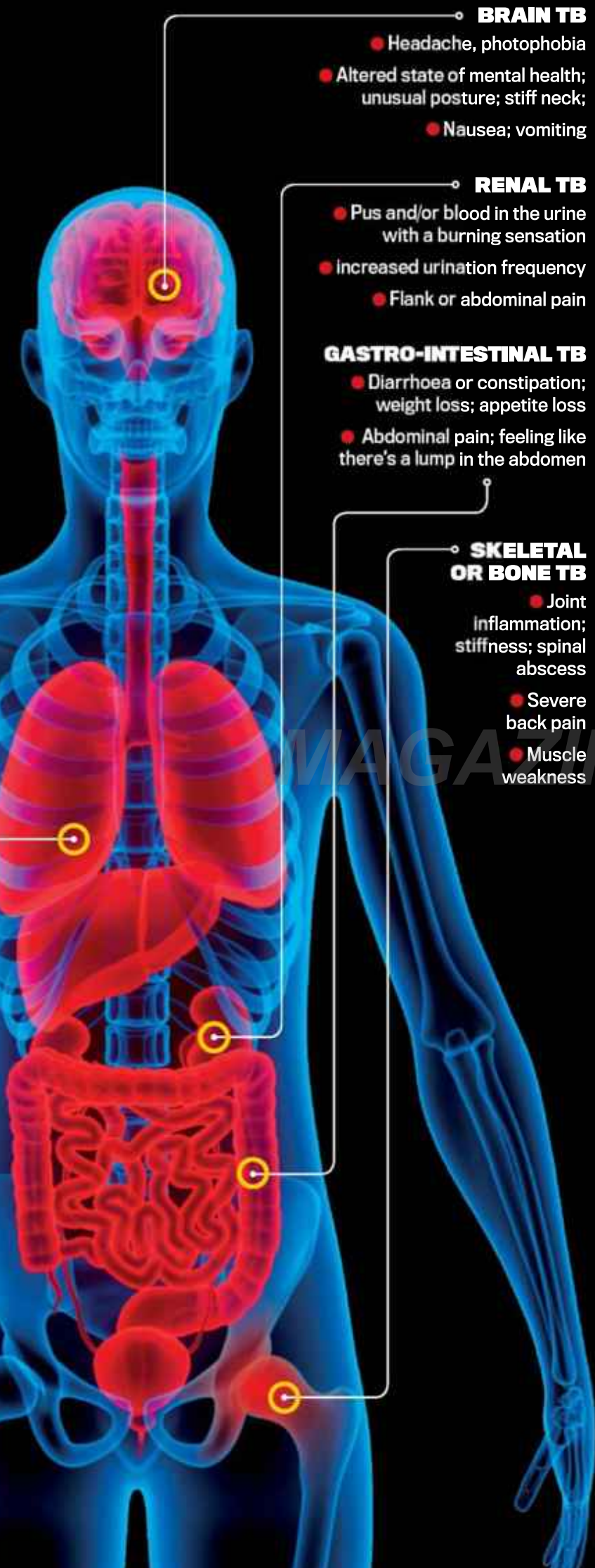
### PLEURAL TB

(infection in pleura, the thin layer of tissue that covers the lungs and lines the interior wall of the chest cavity)

- Breathlessness
- Chest pain
- Cough and weight loss







#### BRAIN TB

- Headache, photophobia
- Altered state of mental health; unusual posture; stiff neck;
- Nausea; vomiting

#### RENAL TB

- Pus and/or blood in the urine with a burning sensation
- Increased urination frequency
- Flank or abdominal pain

#### GASTRO-INTESTINAL TB

- Diarrhoea or constipation; weight loss; appetite loss
- Abdominal pain; feeling like there's a lump in the abdomen

#### SKELETAL OR BONE TB

- Joint inflammation; stiffness; spinal abscess
- Severe back pain
- Muscle weakness

## TB THERAPIES IN INDIA

### STANDARD TB

**Drugs:** Isoniazid, rifampicin, pyrazinamide and ethambutol

**Duration** ~ 24 weeks (initial phase of eight weeks consists of the four first-line drugs, followed by a continuation phase of another 16 weeks of isoniazid, rifampicin and ethambutol)

**Common side-effects:** Chest pain, fatigue, fast heartbeat, coughing up blood, nausea

**Cost:** Rs 7,500 in public sector; Rs 20,000 in private sector

### EXTENSIVELY DRUG-RESISTANT (XDR) TB

**Drugs:** XDR TB is resistant to one or more drugs used in MDR-TB and treatment fails with the wrong drug, dosage or duration. A later generation of fluoroquinolones, with category IV and V injectible drugs such as clofazimine, linezolid, amoxicillin/clavulanate, thioacetazone, imipenem/cilastatin, high-dose isoniazid and clarithromycin are used

**Duration:** Can vary from case to case

**Side-effects:** Joint pain, skin discoloration, diarrhoea, depression, accumulation of blood in brain, insomnia, severe weakness

**Cost:** The above-mentioned study says the average treatment cost for pulmonary XDR TB is \$8,401 (Rs 6.9 lakh)

### MULTI-DRUG-RESISTANT (MDR) TB

**Drugs:** Kanamycin, levofloxacin, cycloserine, ethionamide, pyrazinamide and ethambutol.

P-aminosalicylic acid is given as a reserve drug in case of intolerance of, or a reaction to, any one of the other drugs

**Duration** ~ 24-27 months (six-nine months of intensive phase, followed by a continuation phase of 18 months)

**Common side-effects:** Hearing loss, depression, psychosis, GI disturbance, blurred or changed vision, darkening of skin, fatigue and body ache

**Cost:** Per a 2019 study of 50 patients at Hinduja Hospital in Mumbai, average treatment cost for pulmonary MDR TB was \$5,723 (Rs 4.7 lakh)

### NEW ORAL TABLETS

➤ **Bedaquiline:** It kills the bacteria and stops its growth by inhibiting the production of an enzyme essential to its survival

**Duration:** Six months

**Side-effects:** Chest pain, dizziness, blood in the sputum, irregular heartbeat

➤ **Delamanid:** It blocks the production of two essential components of the bacteria's cell walls, causing its death.

**Duration:** Six months

**Side-effects:** Relatively fewer, but it does cause headaches, dizziness, nausea

*\*While bedaquiline, patented by Janssen Pharmaceuticals until July this year, was launched in the Indian market at Rs 7 lakh per vial, delamanid, patented by Otsuka Pharmaceuticals until October, costs about Rs 1.5 lakh per vial. Both are available only through government channels currently and are provided free of cost. The MSF estimates that in comparison, generic prices may be just around \$8-\$16 (Rs 658-Rs 1,316) per month*



TB infection, or develop into full-blown disease. In the time that Lokhande was struggling to find treatment for her XDR-TB, her younger sister contracted the disease too "since doctors failed to advise the family on how TB spreads at home". Data in the India TB Report bears this out. Around 64 per cent of TB-symptomatic individuals did not seek healthcare. Most commonly, they ignore symptoms (68 per cent) or don't recognise them to be those of TB (18 per cent), and self-medicate (12 per cent). Another 2 per cent cannot afford care. The DRS concluded that 56 per cent of the estimated MDR patients were undiagnosed and 64 per cent untreated.

## DANGERS OF DRUG RESISTANCE

Social stigma is another reason why TB goes undiagnosed. Despite it breaking the class barrier, both perceptually as well as in terms of caseload, "TB remains a disease of the poor," says Blessina Kumar, CEO of the Global Coalition of TB Advocates, and a survivor herself. "And the burden is usually the patient's to bear alone." They either don't go for diagnosis out of fear or stop treatment midway rather than continuing the regimen for the requisite six months or more. This is one of the main reasons why the bacteria turns drug-resistant. It is also why the government chose to extend its earlier Directly Observed Therapy (DOT) programme, as part of which designated health workers ensured that TB patients took their prescribed drugs daily and varied them according to the healing prognosis.

**T**here is also a problem in the health system itself. "Often," says public health expert Chapal Mehra, "testing is delayed because it is either never ordered or ordered very late. So, even people within the health system don't know if the patient has DR-TB and if they do, they don't know what drugs it is resistant to." It is an ordeal Aditi Mathur (*name changed*), 33, a homemaker from Mumbai, remembers all too well. "I felt like a human guinea pig for four years as doctors kept trying and failing to treat my disease. I had MDR-TB and because they didn't know what kind of resistance I had, they wasted the first two years by treating it with the incorrect drugs."

Making the DR-TB blow crueller still is the physical and financial burden of treatment. There are relatively fewer drugs to treat DR-TB, and new drugs are not widely available. The drugs are also far more toxic, causing side-effects that include gastritis, headache, peripheral neuropathy, depression, and, as in Lokhande's case, even hearing loss. Ashna Ashesh, a Patna-based lawyer and MDR-TB survivor, also found TB to be physically and emotionally consuming. "Depression, in a way, was also a kind of consumption, not of the tubercular variety that causes muscle wastage but consumption nevertheless in the sense of existential wastage," she says.



**DIPTENDU BHATTACHARYA**

37, Educationist,  
Kolkata

## REALISING THE VALUE OF LIFE

**D**iptendu was diagnosed with MDR-TB in 2014, when he was still a student at IIT Kharagpur. The disease turned his life upside down. Initially, the doctors did not know that his TB was resistant to the first line of drugs. He spent days reading *Harry Potter* and listening to music, hopeful that he would be able to return to college soon. But that was not to be; after almost a year of treatment, the doctors realised that his treatment would have to be extended, and with far more toxic drugs. "On

the day I took the first [medicine], I couldn't raise my hand beyond the shoulder level.... Soon, I had to buy the injections commercially. The costs made it difficult, but so did the anxiety of missing treatment," recalls Diptendu. He also suffered from severe side effects: "My ears were getting dry, my taste buds got funny, and my eyesight and handwriting went haywire." Reflecting on those years, Diptendu says TB has taught him to value life over material things. "It left me saner and wiser."





Expenses can be as crippling. DR-TB treatment can take up to two years, compared to six months for regular TB. And over that period, according to the Pretoria-headquartered Global TB Alliance for TB Drug Development, a patient needs around 14,000 pills—roughly 20 pills a day. Costs for treatment can vary from Rs 1.3 lakh to Rs 25 lakh for two years, according to a 2019 study of 50 DR-TB patients at Hinduja Hospital in Mumbai published in PubMed. The 2022 India TB report, too, states that 68 per cent of DR-TB patients in India find the treatment cost

catastrophic. In comparison, patients currently on treatment for standard TB need to spend a total of Rs 7,500 in the public sector and Rs 20,000 in the private sector, including indirect costs, according to the NATBPS or the National TB Prevalence Survey, 2019-2021.

## WINNING THE WAR

The Indian government remains determined to eliminate all forms of TB by 2025 and believes it is well on its way to achieving the target. Kerala and Karnataka reduced cases by nearly 40 per cent between 2015 and 2021, according to Union health ministry figures. In fact, Lakshadweep and



**"WE ARE ENGAGING WITH PEOPLE TO IMPROVE AWARENESS ABOUT TB SYMPTOMS, AND ARE FINDING OUT MORE ABOUT**

**THE OUTCOMES OF OUR TB TREATMENTS"**

**—NARESH TREHAN**

*Chairman, Medanta - The Medicity, Gurugram*

Budgam district in Jammu and Kashmir were declared TB-free in 2021, and overall, J&K has reduced cases by 20 per cent. In Maharashtra, one of the worst affected TB states, the Ahmednagar district has achieved 60 per cent reduction, while Akola and Beed have seen cases dropping by 20 per cent. The government attributes these successes to the series of schemes it has put in motion.

In September last year, President Droupadi Murmu launched the Pradhan Mantri TB-Mukt Bharat Abhiyan (PMTBMBA), which allows ministers, celebrities, businessmen, corporates and NGOs to adopt TB patients and become 'Ni-kshay Mitras'. Not only does it help mobilise financial resources, but it also bridges the gap between society and the lonely world of the TB patient, becoming a source for emotional support and easing of stigma. Currently, the government claims nearly 75,000 people and organisations are part of the scheme and 1.01 million patients have been adopted. The programme, says, Union health minister Mansukh Mandaviya, "is a call to action



**ASHNA ASHESH**

30, Lawyer, Patna

## OF MIND AND BODY

**E**ven though Ashna, who was diagnosed with MDR-TB in 2017, had family and friends to support her,

the disease plunged her into depression. She learnt how rarely the mental health effects of TB were spoken about. Doctors dismissed it, families couldn't comprehend it. "I realised depression takes just as much of a toll on the patient as the physical illness. Unsurprisingly, TB patients

often face difficulty in complying with TB treatment," she says. Cured now, Ashna is working to support people with TB-related mental health issues. "Without a comprehensive plan that includes free counselling, TB patients in India are left to their own devices," she says.



for our community to come forward and adopt TB patients to help them get treatment for free. This is a one of its kind initiative in the world, which has grown into a people's movement. People from all walks of life are coming forward to help us end TB". The government is also enlisting TB Vijetas—people who have conquered the disease—for communication and community support strategies, which involve educating people, erasing stigma and extending emotional support to patients as well as their caregivers.

Diagnostics is a crucial frontier that the government is concentrating on. Unlike regular TB, it can be challenging to map the full extent of DR-TB because it requires specialised tests to detect drug resistance. These tests are often expensive and not widely available, particularly in low-resource settings. "The gold standard for identifying drug-resistant TB remains the conventional culture-based test," says Dr Bornali Dutta, director of respiratory medicine at Medanta – The Medicity, Gurugram. "But since the TB bacteria grows slowly, it can take two weeks before results are known." And while new testing technology, such as TrueNAT/ CBNAAT, are game-changers in the rapid and accurate diagnosis of TB and in detecting rifampicin resistance, they are difficult and slow to develop.

"The ideal diagnostic tool for detection of DR-TB should be rapid, accurate, cost-effective, have a long shelf life and provide comprehensive coverage of all ATT drugs [antitubercular agents are a group of drugs used to treat TB]. The challenge is to amalgamate all the above in a single test," says Dr Gunisha Pasricha, principal scientist and infectious diseases expert at MedGenome Labs in Delhi. She and her team have come out with a test called SPIT SEQ, which can not only detect DR-TB in 14 days



**"THE IDEAL DIAGNOSTIC TOOL FOR DR-TB DETECTION SHOULD BE RAPID, ACCURATE, COST-EFFECTIVE, HAVE**

**A LONG SHELF LIFE AND PROVIDE COMPREHENSIVE COVERAGE OF ALL ANTITUBERCULAR DRUGS. THE CHALLENGE IS TO AMALGAMATE ALL THE ABOVE IN A SINGLE TEST"**

**—DR GUNISHA PASRICHA,**  
Principal scientist, MedGenome Labs



**"INDIA IS INSPIRING THE WORLD IN ELIMINATING TB. EVERY COUNTRY SHOULD HAVE A NI-KSHAY MITRA-LIKE INITIATIVE.... IT'S HAPPENING NOT IN PILOT MODE BUT AT SCALE"**

**—LUCICA DITIU,** Executive Director,  
Stop TB Partnership

but also describe the mutation and associated resistance for 18 drugs, including first line, second line and new drugs. The test has been found to have 100 per cent sensitivity and 98.04 per cent specificity. The advent of newer technology means a quick molecular test can find out whether DR-TB is present and which drugs it is resistant to, thus helping start treatment quickly. The new tests also help determine the two things essential for TB treatment—the required duration and dose of the medicines.

## **SPEEDING UP DIAGNOSIS**

To widen the reach of these technologies, the government has been ploughing money into human resources, infrastructure and policy. The number of TrueNAT/ CBNAAT facilities in the country has gone up to 5,090 from a mere 40 in 2014. As of now, there are 80 labs in the country that support the liquid culture system for DR-TB, which has now been expanded to include resistance to more drugs such as linezolid and pyrazinamide.

Significant ground deployment has helped these efforts. In 2021, all of 34 states/UTs conducted door-to-door campaigns, under which over 223 million people were screened, 1,752,903 samples were tested, and 73,772 additional TB patients were identified. Eighty-one mobile TB diagnostic vans have been made available to states to conduct diagnoses in remote areas. In a hugely positive move, the government has also begun treating close household contacts of TB patients and getting them tested. Even if they have latent TB (LTI), they can be treated to ensure that it doesn't develop into active disease. The Mantoux test, which involves injecting a substance called PPD tuberculin into the skin, can help determine LTI in the body. It's available at most private hospitals now for an average cost of Rs 100.

The results have begun to show. In 2021, there was a 19 per cent increase in the number of overall TB cases diag-



# WAR AGAINST TB

In 2018, the Centre set 2025 as the target for the elimination of TB in India. Though that may be more optimistic than realistic, here are a few milestones

## WHAT HAS BEEN DONE

- Lakshadweep and Budgam district in J&K declared TB-free in 2021
- Nine districts from various states achieve 60 per cent reduction in cases between 2015 and 2021
- 75,000 people and organisations under Ni-kshay Mitra have adopted 1 mn patients, helping them not just with funds, but also community support
- Increased access to faster, more accurate TB diagnosis. The number of CBNAAT/TrueNAT facilities in the country has gone up to 5,090 from a mere 40 in 2014
- In 2021, as many as 34 states/UTs conducted door-to-door campaigns, screening over 223 mn people. This resulted in a 19 per cent rise in the number of new cases diagnosed that year
- Engagement with the private sector has yielded results—compared to 106,000 cases in 2014, 733,000 were reported in 2022
- Two critical drugs for DR-TB—bedaquiline and delamanid—are provided free of cost by the government at state-run centres and a few private hospitals
- New regimens are being studied, with the ICMR testing a drug that will bring down treatment duration from two years to six months
- Around 71 mn patients have got financial assistance worth Rs 2,100 crore since 2018



AP

## WHAT REMAINS TO BE DONE

- The amount under Ni-kshay Poshan to support nutrition needs of TB patients must be increased to Rs 2,500 from Rs 500
- Bedaquiline and delamanid will go off patent this year. Generic versions of these must be produced and made available to reduce costs and duration for DR-TB treatment
- Psychological counselling must be provided to TB patients and their caregivers
- Policies must be tailored to ensure consequences for healthcare providers who fail to order a DR-TB test or prescribe incorrect dose/duration of vital antibiotics
- Stigma must be tackled through sustained campaigns
- TB survivors can be made part of communication and support strategies

nosed. Reporting from private sector hospitals too increased significantly—from 106,000 cases in 2014 to 733,000 cases in 2022. In fact, the largest number of TB cases are diagnosed and treated in the private sector. Various state governments have now started building partnerships to improve diagnosis.

**H**aryana is showing the way. Gurugram's Medanta hospital is working with the state in the mission to end TB by 2025. Medanta chairman Dr Naresh Trehan cites a crucial intervention his hospital has made. "We realised analog x-rays are not reliable for diagnosis and rural areas in the state needed digital x-ray technologies. So, we created mobile vans equipped with digital x-rays and

installed molecular technologies as well for quick diagnosis of DR-TB," he says. The hospital also undertook door-to-door active case detection and found it resulted in detection rates three times higher than waiting for patients to come in for a test. "We're also engaging with people to improve awareness of TB symptoms, and finding out more about the outcomes of our TB treatments," adds Dr Trehan. Such partnerships, he feels, will be key to helping rid India of this scourge.

## THE TREATMENT REVOLUTION

In an encouraging observation, the India TB Report noted that of the people diagnosed with TB in 2021, almost 95.5 per



cent were put on treatment. The two new drugs for DR-TB—bedaquiline and delamanid, whose patents are set to expire this year—are not on the market and are provided free of cost by the government as of now. Price is a barrier to mainstreaming them: on the market, they would have cost roughly Rs 2,000 a day, says Dr Nayar. The government, however, is also pushing to develop newer shorter-duration drugs for DR-TB. A new drug by ICMR is being tested in Mumbai, which could reduce treatment to six months.

Many shorter-duration, more effective drugs are now available globally. There are also oral alternatives to injectibles, and drugs with fewer side-effects. These must be brought to India and compulsory licensing undertaken to lower costs. “How many people will approach the courts to ensure they receive the correct drugs for their resistant TB? The time and cost of legal action keep them away. The government must ensure there is no monopoly over these essential drugs due to patents. If we don’t get generic versions for bedaquiline and delamanid, it will be an opportunity lost,” says advocate Anand Grover, who has helped TB patients receive drugs through court orders in the past. Not all, however, plump for decentralisation. AIIMS pathologist Dr Purva Mathur, for instance, “Bacteria are intelligent organisms that can adapt quickly... That is why they are older than humans. They’re getting used to the drugs we have, and we aren’t developing enough new drugs,” she says. A wider arsenal, in that view, may be a more logical objective than the popularisation of just two drugs.

**S**ince affordability remains a bottleneck, the government has launched several schemes to help patients. The Jan Arogya Yojana is one lifeline, the government also provides financial assistance of Rs 500 per patient under the Ni-kshay Poshan Yojana and free medicines through government hospitals. Around 7.1 million TB patients have got assistance worth around Rs 2,100 crore since 2018 under it. The government is also hoping that cheaper equivalents of bedaquiline and delamanid will further lower the treatment cost in late 2023; both drugs comprise 35-70 per cent of the cost of the DR-TB treatment currently. The government is also providing nutrition kits under various schemes, since poor nutrition is a leading cause of TB. A 2022 study in PubMed by researchers at Mangalore’s Yenepoya University estimated that undernutrition contributed to 902,000 of India’s TB cases. According to WHO, people with undernutrition are three times more at risk of developing TB. Per its data, globally in 2021, some 2.2 million new TB cases were attributable to undernutrition alone, including 655,000 in India.

As part of the government’s latest TB-Mukt Panchayat Initiative, the support of 250,000 gram panchayats will be enlisted to raise awareness about TB, eliminate stigma and monitor service delivery. The panchayats can also help identify TB survivors and involve them in their communication and counselling strategies. India also has a system in place to monitor the progress of TB elimination in each



**“INDIA’S LEADERSHIP IS TAKING THE ELIMINATION OF TB SERIOUSLY. THIS IS AN EMBLEMATIC DECISION, AS**

**IT COMES FROM A COUNTRY THAT IS MOST AFFECTED BY TB”**

**—LEENA MENGHANEY,**

*Regional Head, MSF Access Campaign, South Asia*

district. A new TB Preventive Therapy has been launched too, for those who are at high risk of developing the disease. As part of the new regime, the first-line drugs have to be taken only once a week for 12 weeks, instead of one drug daily for six months.

## INDIA’S WAY

India’s efforts are being lauded by global stakeholders. “India’s leadership,” says Leena Menghaney, regional head of the MSF Access Campaign, South Asia, “is taking the elimination of TB seriously. This decision is such an emblematic one, coming from a country that is one of the most affected by TB. The generic competition and the scale-up of the shorter oral regimen containing bedaquiline will have a price-lowering effect.” Dr Lucica Ditiu, executive director of the Stop TB Partnership, echoed the same at the Varanasi summit. “India is inspiring the world in TB elimination. Every country should have the Ni-kshay Mitra initiative. I salute the way it is happening at sub-national levels too, not in pilot mode but at scale,” she said. The Global Fund for Malaria, TB and HIV is setting aside over 50 per cent of the \$500 million allocation to India to TB in its forthcoming 2024-27 grant cycle, which is expected to improve treatment coverage, access and affordability further.

Not everyone is quite sure that India will be able to eliminate TB by 2025. “I think most people know the deadline is unrealistic,” says Blessina Kumar. “The government is setting many initiatives in motion, but they aren’t being seen all the way through.” Mehra shares her doubts. “No, it is not possible,” he says, about the deadline. “Even if we were on the way, there has been a setback due to Covid. The government’s current framework is limited and doesn’t factor in ground realities.” But the question isn’t whether we can end TB by 2025. The goal is strictly aspirational; what it can do is accelerate the momentum on the intent to eliminate a disease that has consumed us for so long. ■

*(With inputs from Himanshu Shekhar)*



# Uttar Pradesh

## THE LAND OF TIRTHANKARS

Can you guess where the largest sculpture collection in the world related to Jain culture is located. It is neither in Rajasthan nor in Bihar but in a lesser-known part of Uttar Pradesh where stands the fort complex consisting 31 Jain temples housing around 2,000 sculptures which is in fact the largest such collection in the world. It's the District Lalitpur in the land of Bundelkhand which is considered the most important Jain religious site in Uttar Pradesh and thousands of tourists visit this place every year.

**I**t is not the only place but one out of many important religious places related to Jain Culture which is being developed by the Uttar Pradesh government under Jain Circuit. In Varanasi, a lot of development work on sites related to Jain heritage is going on under the PPP model also.

The Ministry of Tourism under the Swadesh Darshan Scheme has identified Tirthankar Circuit as one of the fifteen thematic circuits for development in the country. All the sites associated with Jainism are covered under this circuit. Considering that 17 out of 24 tirthankars of Jainism were born in what is now Uttar Pradesh, there is a lot of scope for developing a tourist circuit in the state.

The development of tirthankar circuit in UP will further promote religious tourism in the state. It will help in spreading the messages of peace. The Uttar Pradesh government last year announced its new tourism policy. Many circuits focusing on the development of sites related to

different themes and religious beliefs were proposed and work has been started on them also. State government under the leadership of Yogi Adityanath has decided to develop the religious sites related to Jainism under the Jain circuit. The government through the policy has also laid emphasis on developing the lesser-known places.

Lalitpur is a very important part of Jain heritage. The Jain circuit will also be extended from

Deogarh, Hastinapur to Parshwanath Digambar Jain temple, Ramnagar.

State cabinet has also paved the way for the setting up of Mahavir University in Meerut.

UP is a sacred destination for Jains as 17 tirthankaras were born here in Meerut, Agra, Kaushambi, Varanasi, Deoria, Ayodhya, Shravasti and Farrukhabad.

Some of the Jain culture destinations are situated in remote areas and lack basic facilities, That is why the state government decided to work on the development of these places under the Jain circuit. The vast land of Uttar Pradesh is richly blessed by the Jain pilgrimages. Not to mention this state in North India has also been the birthplace of six Jain Tirthankaras, namely Rishabhanatha, Ajitanatha, Abhinandanatha, Sumatinatha, Anantanatha, and Parshvanatha. While the first five graced the land of Ayodhya with their birth, Varanasi was blessed by being the birthplace of Parshvanatha, the 23rd Jain Tirthankara. Needless to say, Uttar Pradesh has an ancient connection with Jainism. The influence of Jainism can be seen largely in the Bundelkhand region of Uttar Pradesh where Deogarh is an important Jain pilgrimage destination with the Fort Temples dominating its silhouette.





# WAITING FOR A PUSH

Several of India's strategic infrastructure projects in border areas await environmental approval. This, when Chinese black-top roads inch closer to the LAC itself

## JAMMU & KASHMIR 38

Prominent project:  
**Reasi-Arnas-Mohr Road**

Commenced: **2018**

Status: **Pending with conservator of forests, Jammu**

## RAJASTHAN 4

Prominent project:  
**Pithewala-Pt 141-Ramgarh Road**

Commenced: **2021**

Status: **Pending with deputy conservator of forests, Jaisalmer**



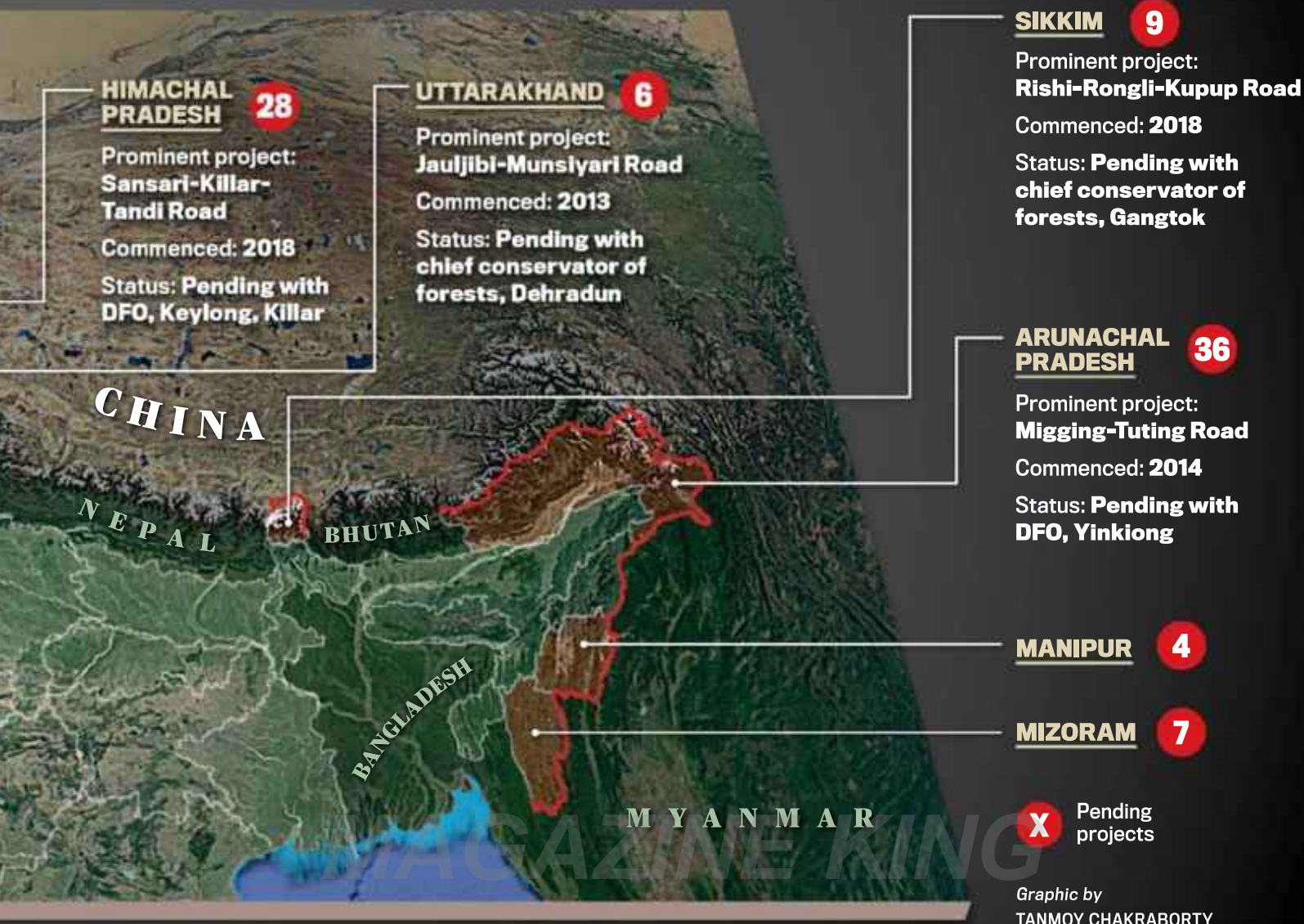
## THE BIG STORY DEFENCE

# BATTLING THE GREENS

THE FOREST (CONSERVATION) AMENDMENT BILL WHICH SEEKS TO EXEMPT STRATEGIC PROJECTS ON THE BORDERS FROM GREEN LAWS IS WELCOMED BY THE MILITARY. WILL ENVIRONMENTAL SAFEGUARDS SURVIVE IN THE RUSH TO PRIORITISE NATIONAL SECURITY?

By **Pradip R. Sagar**





**T**

The aggressive advance of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) on vital portions of the 3,488-km-long Line of Actual Control (LAC) in recent years had sharpened fears around an old truth. Beijing had always been known to show a beaver-like diligence in building a modern road network on its side of the de facto border. Now, the clashes along the LAC in 2020 and the protracted standoff thereafter made apparent the sheer depth of its capac-

ity build-up—new frontier depots and barracks had sprouted on the back of a massively scaled-up grid of roads and runways. That realisation acted like a spur in the flank of the Indian army, and it consequently began looking with renewed urgency at the task of ramping up its own border infrastructure.

Enhanced frontier connectivity is a military imperative for India—the terrain on this side of the LAC is vastly more perilous, and quick mobilisation of troops was clearly a stark need yet to be fully met. From roads, bridges and ammunition depots to surveillance apparatus, India has accelerated work on the nuts and bolts. From 2008 to 2014, some 7,270 metres of bridges and 3,610 km of border roads had been built. Such activity quickened under the NDA government—between 2014-20, about 14,450 metres of bridges and 4,764 km

of roads were completed. The capital outlay for the Border Roads Organisation (BRO) too was increased to Rs 5,000 crore in the Union budget for 2023-24, from Rs 3,500 crore in 2022-23. And an impetus is being given to the India-China Border Roads (ICBR) project that envisages constructing strategic roads, including bridges and tunnels.

But India faces another challenge here: most frontier areas also lie in ecologically sensitive zones, and ramping up infrastructure is not a process free of doubt or logistical tangles. The Forest (Conservation) Amendment Bill 2023, which the Union government tabled on March 29, is meant to clear some of the bureaucratic jungle. Among other things, it aims to fast-track strategic and security-related projects, especially last-mile connectivity and development of border villages. It proposes that forest





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## **"THERE IS A NEED TO FAST-TRACK STRATEGIC AND SECURITY-RELATED PROJECTS OF NATIONAL IMPORTANCE"**

**BHUPENDER YADAV,**  
Union environment minister

forest clearance still takes several years. "At present, over 60 BRO projects along the northern borders are awaiting Stage I and Stage II forest clearances from the state and Union governments," she says.

### **COMPENSATION CONCERNS**

Though developmental projects in ecologically sensitive areas have to tread a fine line, local inhabitants of border areas have by and large welcomed border infrastructure being beefed up

as it gives them better connectivity. "Though there are instances of opposition to hydropower projects or maybe on the army's field firing ranges, border infrastructure per se has never faced much opposition from locals," says Das. For the Nelong-Sonam motorable road in Uttarkashi district of Uttarakhand, some environmentalists raised concerns about possible damage to the flora and fauna of the region. Eventually, the BRO managed to convince them that the work being done followed the best practices. "Normally, locals do not resist border infrastructure. But in some places like Arunachal Pradesh, we have seen litigation against the government's compensation rates," says a BRO official, who added that the Supreme Court has made it clear that the compensation should be at market rates, not circle rates (government rate). For acquiring forest land, BRO also pays monetary compensation to the forest department for afforestation (one needs to plant two trees if one tree is being cut for constructing/ expanding roads).

Lt General D.S. Hooda, former commander of the army's northern command, says environmental clearances have always been a bottleneck for military infrastructure in border areas. "Since much of our border areas have thick forests, mountain ranges and rivers, we have to get green clearances. Compared to China, which has built black-top roads right up to the border, we are lagging way behind. There has been a major infrastructural push on the LAC in the past five to six years, and I think this bill will make things smoother for the army," says Lt Gen. Hooda.

For instance, according to top military officials, 34 border outposts in Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh—including Lukung, Chusul, Dhan Singh and Bao Nallah in Ladakh and Tapola, Kangri, Balchida, Phuphu, Lama and Amaha in Dibang Valley district in Arunachal—took years to get environmental and forest clearances amidst repeated incursions by the Chinese military in these areas. According to Col. Ashok Pandey, an engineering officer who has served with the BRO, various

provisions of the Forest Conservation Act (FCA), 1980, pose a challenge to speedy completion of projects.

The high-profile project where environmental concerns led to the purported legal stonewalling of defence infrastructure was in the 825 km Char Dham expressway project in Uttarakhand. Inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2016, this was ostensibly a tourism project to improve connectivity between the religious sites of Badrinath, Kedarnath, Yamunotri and Gangotri. But its strategic significance was not lost on anyone—the roads and feeder roads are crucial for the military to have access to the LAC. In 2017, the project came under the scanner of the National Green Tribunal, which heard pleas that the road widening works violated the Bhagirathi Eco Sensitive Zone laws.

**T**he petitioners said the region was unstable and prone to landslides and extreme rainfall events, and widespread felling of trees and cutting of hillsides for the project would spell doom for the region. As the matter moved to the Supreme Court, a high-powered committee (HPC) was formed in 2019, which gave elaborate instructions on following environmental safeguards. With the ministry of defence and the Union ministry of road transport and highways (MoRTH) also a party to the issue, the SC also created an oversight committee for strategic roads to monitor strict compliance with the law.

The MoD vigorously pursued its case for the widening of 674 km of 'strategic roads' that led to the LAC, stating it was needed for the movement of heavy vehicles carrying troops, self-propelled artillery and other machinery. Appearing for the government, Attorney General K.K. Venugopal said: "Our BrahMos missile is 42 feet long and the army needs large vehicles to carry its launchers. If it cannot move its missile launchers to the northern border, how will it fight a war?"

The SC in September 2020 had allowed the carriageway width to be



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### BORING FORWARD

The BRO at work on the Nechiphu tunnel, West Kameng district, Arunachal Pradesh

### KEY PROJECTS BEING FAST-TRACKED

➤ The Siyom bridge in Arunachal Pradesh: a 100-metre-long, class 70 steel arch superstructure on the Mong-Yingkiong Road over Siyom river

➤ The Nimmu-Padam-Darcha (NPD) road section: This 300-km-long road axis is being black-topped as a two-lane road. It will be the third link between Ladakh and mainland India

➤ Nechiphu tunnel on the 317 km Balipara-Charduar-Tawang Road

➤ Arunachal Frontier Highway following the McMahon Line from Mago, through Tawang, Upper Subansiri, Tuting, Mechuka, Upper Siang, Debang Valley, Kibithu, Dong, ending at Vijayanagar near Myanmar border

5.5 metres, but eventually, given the “serious challenges to national security” in the recent past, gave a nod for 10-metre-wide roads for the crucial 674 km. But the human and environmental costs are real too—the HPC had noted 21 deaths due to landslides along the project’s roads. The most spectacular fallout was the sudden and catastrophic land subsidence in Joshimath in January 2023. Many experts blamed the heightened construction activities around the town—including the Char Dham project roads—for the disaster. The huge tourism rush in the area, with the attendant building of hotels and houses, were also to blame. Soon after, work on the Helang-Marwari bypass of the project was postponed. It had earlier been red-flagged by the HPC.

### FOUR-STAGE CLEARANCE

The lengthy process of getting an environmental clearance involves four stages: screening of the project; scoping (documenting goals, costs, deadlines) to determine the terms of reference; public consultations to assess the impact on the local community and a detailed

scrutiny of the proposal by an expert panel. Similarly, forest clearances also have two stages involving approval from various officials like the divisional forest officer, chief conservator of forests, principal chief conservator of forests as well from the integrated regional office.

Environmental/ forest clearance from the states is a must before the MoEF’s final go-ahead and the various formalities of the clearance process at the state level need the close coordination of scores of officials. Experts say that non-availability of ground staff and poor coordination among the agencies concerned are largely responsible for delays. Often, states are loath to allotting land to the BRO.

Defence and strategic analyst Maj. Gen. (ret'd) Ashok Kumar, a Kargil war veteran, believes the army needs a huge infrastructure surge in border areas. “While fund allocation and fast-tracking of infrastructure have been given a push, delayed or non-availability of forest clearance affects the critical infrastructure needs adversely. This not only escalates the project cost but results in a situation where the army cannot

move out tanks and long-range weapon systems to the forward areas.” However, he feels that a balance needs to be maintained between military planning and environmental safeguards.

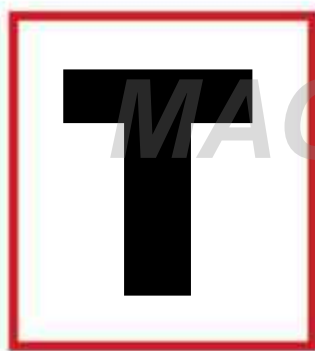
Lt Gen. (ret'd) Anil Ahuja, former deputy chief of Integrated Defence Staff (Policy Planning and Force Development), says the Forest (Conservation) Amendment Bill is a long overdue development from the perspective of national security, but that it is creditable that the government has not gone overboard in according blanket exemptions. Exempted areas have been kept at five to 10 hectares, which should be the optimum requirement. Also, it does not exempt security forces from carrying out compensatory afforestation that is mandatory under the green law. “This is the right balance—removing impediments to border infrastructure development and giving sanctity to safeguarding environment,” Lt Gen Ahuja says. Kanchi Kohli adds that the bill needs a thorough debate in Parliament, informed by discussions with communities most likely to be affected by the proposed exemptions. ■



# KCR'S GRAND AMBITION

The BRS chief is hoping to win a third term for his party in Telangana even as he has one eye on the throne in Delhi. Is it just empty rhetoric or does the CM have a clear plan?

By AMARNATH K. MENON



**THE GOAL SOUNDS FAR-FETCHED**, even a pipe dream one could say, but Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS) supremo K. Chandrashekar Rao would have you believe that it's within his sights. "In the coming 2024 parliamentary polls, the next government is ours, ours and ours," KCR, as he is popularly known, declared after inaugurating a 125-foot-tall statue of Dr B.R. Ambedkar in Hyderabad on April 14. Having already rechristened the Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS), which catapulted him to power, the BRS in October last year, the Telangana chief minister is beginning to act on his ambitious 'Double 100' plan for a pan-India presence. The goal is for the BRS to first win 100 of the 119 seats in the state assembly election due in November this year, and then corner 100 of the 543 Lok Sabha seats in the next general election in mid-2024.

The task at hand looks daunting, considering the challenge the third-term hopeful BRS faces from both the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) at home. In its earlier avatar as TRS, it had won 88, or 74 per cent, of the assembly seats in 2018, up from 63 when it first came to power in the newly created state in 2014. Its Lok Sabha



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performance has been less impressive—victory in nine, or just over 50 per cent, of the 17 parliamentary constituencies in the state in 2019, two less than its 2014 tally of 11. The target of 100, thus, seems a bit of a stretch, especially after the party leaders have ruled out a pre-poll alliance. That the BRS is recognised as a state party only in Telangana compounds the problem as its candidates in other states, including Andhra Pradesh, will have to opt for free symbols instead of the party's 'car' symbol.

But KCR is raring to go against all odds. "Some of our enemies may not be able to digest this. But one spark is enough to light a fire. It

requires self-confidence to say this, but the response is visible," he asserted at the statue unveiling near the swank new state secretariat, also named after Ambedkar. The previous evening, speaking at an iftar party hosted by the state government, KCR declared that India is waiting for the right leader and the right party, and that the TRS took on a new name in an effort to save the country.

EXPANDING FOOTPRINT

Eyeing a key role in national politics, KCR plans to embark on a nationwide tour in June, even though the BRS, say party insiders, is focusing on contesting in only three neighbouring

states—Maharashtra, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh—for now. Together with Telangana, they account for 118 Lok Sabha seats: 48, 28 and 25, respectively. There is no word yet on the seats it plans to contest in these states.

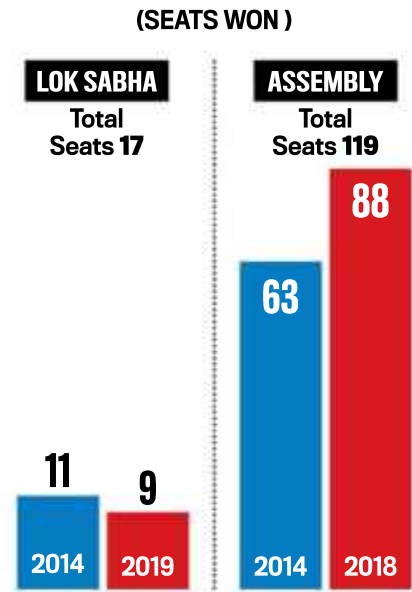
Though, to test the waters, the party will first enter the fray in elections to about 200 local bodies and 12 of the 34 zila parishads in Maharashtra, expected to take place later this year. This, even as a BRS team led by KCR's nephew T. Harish Rao, Telangana's finance and health minister, drums up support for the "like-minded" Janata Dal (Secular) in areas with a significant number of Telugu speakers in Karnataka, before the May 10 assembly polls in the state. With an eye on the final prize, that is, Lok Sabha seats outside Telangana, the BRS has identified Karnataka's 40 assembly seats spread over 12 districts—Ballari, Kolar, Bengaluru Rural and Urban, Raichur, Koppal, Tumakuru, Chitradurga, Chikkaballapur, Yadgiri, Bidar and Kalaburagi—that have a sizeable Telugu-speaking electorate. KCR is deputing a minister each to expand the party's footprint in these districts.

In the other dominant Telugu-speaking state, Andhra Pradesh, the BRS has taken a different route to woo the locals. The party leaders have



CLARION CALL  
KCR addressing a public meeting in Hyderabad

THE TRS TALLY  
How TRS, the former avatar of BRS, has fared in the past two elections





been campaigning determinedly against the privatisation of the Vizag Steel Plant; the move seen as their bid to cash in on an emotive issue.

## FOCUS ON FARMERS

The party's electoral strategy hinges on showcasing its "Telangana model" of pro-farmer and development initiatives to make inroads into other states. KCR's new slogan "*Ab Ki Bar Kisan Sarkar*" says it all. "Our vote is a powerful weapon that should be exercised judiciously," is his common refrain to groups of farmers calling on him from other states ever since he held a meeting with farm union leaders from across the country in August last year. In Maharashtra, as he holds one rally after the other, KCR highlights his government's schemes while decrying the agrarian crisis, especially water woes and farmers' suicides, in the western state. The template is being religiously followed, be it at his first two rallies held in Nanded (one of the backward and predominantly agrarian districts of the Marathwada region) on February 5 and March 26, or at the recent one in Aurangabad on April 24.

There are also other facets of the Telangana model that the BRS and its leaders like to tout. So how has the KCR regime been performing on the economic and development front? "The per capita income in Telangana has increased from Rs 1.24 lakh in 2014-15 to Rs 3.17 lakh in 2022-23, surpassing all other states," claims BRS working president and KCR's son K.T. Rama Rao, or KTR. "This performance is despite an inimical Union government." The figures are based on the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation data covering 16 states released in March. KTR, who is also a cabinet minister holding the charge of industries, IT and municipal administration, further shares that Telangana is among the top contributing states to India's GDP and third in the Ease of Doing Business.

### CM'S OUTREACH

KCR pays tributes to Ambedkar after unveiling his statue in Hyderabad, Apr. 14



## THE BRS ELECTORAL STRATEGY HINGES ON SHOWCASING ITS 'TELANGANA MODEL' OF PRO-FARMER AND DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES TO MAKE INROADS INTO OTHER STATES

"It is the first state to provide drinking water to all homes, build the world's largest lift irrigation project [in Kaleshwaram] and has the best rural development model in the country with 100 per cent Open Defecation Free villages. Be it agriculture or technology the state is right at the top," he says. During the nine years of BRS rule, adds Harish Rao, each village in Telangana has received more than Rs 100 crore development funds in various forms.

### ELECTION-YEAR SOPS

The clock ticking on his plans, KCR is eager to implement the newly announced populist schemes vigor-

ously and speed up the old ones. The Dalit Bandhu scheme, which was launched in 2021 and has provided Rs 10 lakh each for starting a business to 1,100 Scheduled Caste families in the Huzurabad assembly segment, is to be extended to 130,000 beneficiaries across the state. As part of his national ambitions, KCR also talks of taking the scheme to Dalits across India, covering 2.5 million families each year, "after coming to power at the Centre".

Then, there are plans to extend the Rythu Bandhu scheme to 1.5 million tenant farmers and farm labourers. This agriculture investment support scheme provides Rs 10,000 aid an acre per year to farmers. The ongoing Kanti



## THE 'DOUBLE 100' DREAM

➤ BRS has set a target to win 100 of the 119 seats in Telangana

➤ The more ambitious goal is to corner 100 Lok Sabha seats next year, even as insiders say the party will enter the fray only in Maharashtra, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh besides Telangana. Together, they account for 118 parliamentary seats

➤ While the BRS has ruled out a pre-poll alliance, KCR plans to set out on a pan-India tour in June

➤ To test the water, BRS will contest local body

polls in Maharashtra this year. KCR has been holding rallies in the state since February

➤ In Karnataka, it has identified 40 assembly segments spread over 12 districts that have a significant Telugu-speaking population. For now, it is drumming up support for the JD(S)

➤ In Andhra, BRS is opposing the privatisation of Vizag Steel Plant, cashing in on an emotive issue

➤ Farmers remain at the core of KCR's grand plans, and he is showcasing his

pro-agriculture and development schemes in a bid to make inroads into other states

➤ Back home, he is working overtime to implement newly announced populist schemes and speed up the old ones

➤ MLAs have been tasked with forming teams to reach out to the electorate for sharing information on government schemes

➤ For a reality check, KCR is also toying with the idea to hold local body polls on 6,000-odd vacant seats

Velugu programme, to test the eyesight of all adults to prevent avoidable blindness, has already covered 10 million people in the first 50 days. Harish Rao lists other schemes that are bringing in "transformative changes": 24-hour free power supply to farmers, Mission Kakatiya (restoration of irrigation tanks and lakes), Mission Bhagiratha (safe drinking water supply to villages) and Harithaharam (afforestation).

But a few flagship programmes have come into question for poor implementation. For instance, the 2BHK housing scheme launched for the poor in 2015. While the government received 1 million applications, it approved 292,000 and floated tenders to construct just 228,000 houses. Records show 160,000 tenements were readied, of which fewer than 60,000 have been allotted. On April 17, vexed with the inordinate delay in the allotment of houses ready since 2018, some applicants in Jangaon broke open the locks and occupied them.

To placate the aggrieved, KCR in

March announced a Rs 3 lakh one-time grant to 400,000 beneficiaries who have a plot to build homes under the Gruha Lakshmi scheme. A "green channel" is being created for swift disbursal of funds, as party workers fear any delay could backfire when the state goes to the polls later this year. Equally challenging is the promise to regularise both unlawful squatting on government land and distribution of 'podu' forest land among tribals. Extending the Dalit Bandhu scheme and distributing the 'podu' land pattas (title rights) were the key files KCR signed on entering his

**GOVT SCHEMES SUCH AS 2BHK HOUSING FOR THE POOR HAVE COME INTO QUESTION DUE TO THEIR POOR IMPLEMENTATION**

office at the new state secretariat on April 30. Critics see his appeasement initiatives for select sections as signs of desperation in an election year. "The BRS government will collapse under its own weight of broken promises," says Telangana Congress chief A. Revanth Reddy. "The failure of schemes like the 2BHK housing, jobs to every household and uninterrupted power supply for farming will ensure its defeat."

### EAR TO THE GROUND

For a reality check, KCR is toying with the idea to conduct polls on 6,000-odd local body seats lying vacant for nearly three years. Though the TRS won 95 per cent of the seats in 2019, the move looks risky, given the BJP's aggressive politicking and improving electoral prospects besides the challenge posed by the Congress. Rebel trouble with growing infighting in the BRS is another cause of worry. But political analysts feel, as of now, it is "advantage BRS" as there is no apparent anti-KCR wave in the state. "The BRS is the frontrunner with its formidable resources and leadership," says Harathi Vageeshan, a political scientist at the NALSAR University, Hyderabad. "It will enter both the assembly and Lok Sabha elections, highlighting its performance."

At the party plenary on April 27—the BRS Foundation Day and the first after the name change—KCR said that legislators facing allegations of corruption, especially in the implementation of flagship welfare schemes, are unlikely to be fielded again. They could even face suspension from the party. He plans to hold one-on-one meetings with laggard MLAs after the elections in Karnataka. In effect, the BRS is to bank on newbies to counter anti-incumbency in more than 30 seats. Meanwhile, the customary show of strength usually held the same day has been put off to October 10 in Warangal. The party has attributed it to the ongoing harvesting of the rabi crop. Though, October will be the right time for KCR to gauge if the seeds of the grand ambition that he has planted stand a chance to yield the desired dividends. ■



# GEHLOT CRACKS DOWN ON CRIME

AS RAJASTHAN RECORDS A SPIKE IN EXTORTION, FIRING AND OTHER GANG-RELATED CASES, STATE POLICE FINALLY GO AFTER ORGANISED CRIME NETWORKS AND HISTORY-SHEETERS, BOTH ON THE GROUND AND ONLINE

By Rohit Parihar



PURUSHOTTAM DIWAKAR

# C

Chief minister Ashok Gehlot seemed to have taken a leaf out of Uttar Pradesh counterpart Yogi Adityanath's book in his address at the Rajasthan Police Foundation Day event in Jaipur on April 16. "Our police will not be cowed down," he declared. "Gangsters and criminals should either surrender or they will be ruined." That same day, the reward money on fugitives was enhanced after a decade, with the state's top cop getting the powers to announce a reward of Rs 5 lakh, up from Rs 1 lakh.

Meanwhile, a video with the social media profiles of a few of Rajasthan's notorious gangsters is doing the rounds. It has a dialogue from the film *Pushpa: The Rise*—"Pushpa, Pushpa Raj... *mein jhukega nahin* (I will not bow down)"—playing in the background, followed by the song "Teri jhalak asharfi" as a criminal shot at by

police hobbles on a bandaged leg, as though doing the hook step made famous by the film's hero Allu Arjun. At least one of the criminals depicted thus is from the gang of Lawrence Bishnoi.

The police in Rajasthan are trying very hard to restore people's faith in the state's law and order situation by being tough on criminals amid a spurt in gang-related crimes. Cases of firing shot up from 311 in 2019 to 480 in 2022 and numbered 107 in just the first two months this year. Extortion attempts, likewise, rose from 11 in 2019 to 99 in 2022 (see *A Rising Threat*). Criminals flashing their arms, often illicit, on social media accounts is a popular new trend. The past month, at least four MLAs have complained of either being attacked or receiving threats to their lives. The Olympian Krishna Poonia, now an MLA and





**THE CLEAN-UP ACT**  
Police take away a suspect at Kotputli during statewide raids on April 25

**11,438**

HISTORY-SHEETERS  
IN RAJASTHAN

**913\***

IN JAIL

**314\***

ABSCONDING

**8,950**

CRIMINALS, INCLUDING  
HISTORY-SHEETERS,  
ARRESTED DURING  
STATEWIDE RAIDS  
ON APRIL 25

### PROACTIVE POLICING YIELDS RESULTS

Proactive policing led to an increase in detection of offences, as shown by the **YoY rise in FIRs** in March

DRUG  
PEDDLING

**90%**

ILLEGAL  
ARMS

**55%**

LIQUOR SMUGGLING

**8%**

\*as on April 14

Source: Rajasthan Police



**“Our police will not be cowed down... Gangsters and criminals should either surrender, or they will be ruined”**

**ASHOK GEHLOT**

CM in his Rajasthan Police Foundation Day address

chairperson of the state sports council, has been given Z security following threats, while Ranjeeta Koli, the BJP MP from Bharatpur, has got Y-plus security after a series of attacks on her.

Gehlot, who also holds charge of the home department, has been holding meetings regularly with top cops on how to curtail such crimes. He anticipates a further spurt with the state going to the polls in December. On April 25, in a coordinated early-morning operation, 18,826 police-men, divided into 4,143 teams, raided 12,854 locations spread across 32 of the 33 districts. The action resulted in the arrest of 8,950 alleged criminals, including 553 with standing warrants. A similar ‘Area Domination, Raid and Search Campaign’ carried out through

the second half of March had led to the arrest of 20,542 criminals. Among the prime targets are those booked for misusing firearms, those out on bail in extortion cases and absconders.

In another significant move, Gehlot introduced the Rajasthan Control of Organised Crime Bill in the assembly in March. The proposed legislation, along the lines of similar laws in Maharashtra, Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh, aims to give more teeth to police to check organised crime. A criminal gang has been defined as any group of criminals of over two people involved in violence or intimidation. Among other things, it makes it difficult for gangsters to get bail. Earlier, in February, the CM appointed Dinesh M.N. as the additional director general (ADG),

crime. The senior cop had spent seven years in jail in the alleged encounter killing of history-sheeter Sohrabuddin Sheikh and two others near Ahmedabad in November 2005 before being discharged after the special CBI court found “no prima facie evidence to link” him to the killings. He also led a team that gunned down the dreaded gangster Anandpal Singh in Churu district in June 2017. That encounter led to widespread protests by members of Singh’s Rajput community, forcing the government to order a CBI probe.

Though the police got a clean chit, Anandpal’s elimination opened up the space for other small-time gangsters, including Singh’s rival Raju Theth, as well as others from adjoining states. As police failed to keep up the pressure, Rajasthan started seeing rising incidents of gang violence and extortion with shopkeepers being shot at in busy markets in broad daylight.

### THE TURNING POINT

What made Gehlot sit up and take notice was when Theth, who was trying to get into white-collar crimes with the alleged patronage of some politicians, was killed on his doorstep in Sikar in December 2022 and the Lawrence Bishnoi gang claimed responsibility. Then, on the night of January 28 this year, there was firing outside G-Club, a nightclub in the upscale Tonk Road neighbourhood in capital Jaipur. In all, 19 rounds were fired. The club owner is among the prominent businessmen who had been getting extortion calls to pay ‘protection money’ since November last year. Bishnoi’s hitman Ritik Boxer took credit for this on social media. He was arrested from the Nepal border in March. In all, 13 suspects have been arrested so far, including two minors, one of whom was among the three who had opened fire. The gang had apparently involved the juveniles knowing it would be easier to get them out if they were to get caught.

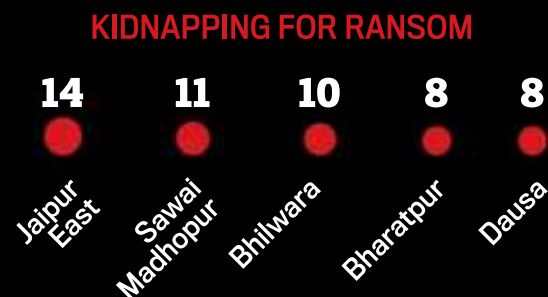
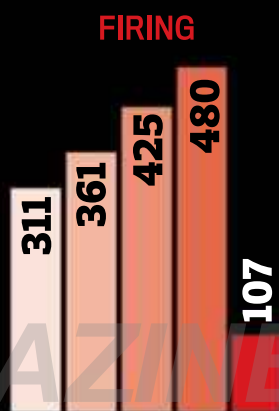
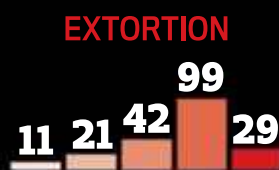
The gang led by Bishnoi, who has been operating it from jail since his arrest in an encounter in 2014, has

become a persistent headache for the state police. Bishnoi made the national headlines after issuing a death threat to actor Salman Khan in 2018 and, more recently, for his gang’s involvement in the murder of Punjabi singer Sidhu Moosewala last May. When brought to Jaipur on production warrants in February, Bishnoi is learnt to have told the police that he was not involved in the G-Club firing and similar crimes that took place recently. Due to his “clout”, say the police, Bishnoi’s name is often used by novices to make extortion calls.



## TROUBLE SPOTS

Police districts with the highest number of FIRs between Jan. 2019 and Feb. 2023





## COORDINATED CLAMPDOWN

➤ In March, CM Ashok Gehlot introduced the Rajasthan Control of Organised Crime Bill in the state assembly, which among other stricter provisions will make it tough for gangsters to get bail

➤ Police have launched the 'Area Domination, Raid and Search Campaign'. In one such statewide operation carried out on April 25, 4,143 teams raided 12,854 sites and arrested 8,950 criminals

➤ On April 16, the reward money on fugitives was enhanced after a decade. The DGP now has the power to announce a reward of Rs 5 lakh, up from Rs 1 lakh

➤ On CM's orders, police have identified 2,471 ill-gotten properties of criminals; info is being passed on to the I-T and other authorities; a few unauthorised ones razed

➤ Police are also keeping an eye on the social media accounts of criminals. Cases lodged for displaying arms against followers; parents of minor followers told to counsel their children

also disrupt efforts to attract youngsters through social media.

"We often carry out early-morning raids in several districts in one go with heavy deployment," adds Dinesh. "This stuns the criminals, creating fear among them. It also gives people confidence and they start coming forward with information against the law-breakers." Rajasthan cops, however, used to eschew encounters as a practice. "We did not want our cops to turn trigger-happy," says a senior bureaucrat. In fact, there have

been only four encounter deaths since 2019. This year, though, the guns are out. In the first three months of 2023, 21 criminals have been injured in encounters and 25 shot at while trying to escape. They include three suspects from the G-Club firing who were shot in the leg when they allegedly tried to flee while being brought from Agra on January 30.

### EYES ON THE GANGSTERS

The police have also been keeping an eye on the social media accounts of these criminals as they have become a significant lure for the youth, who follow them for their lifestyle and the display of arms. For instance, Deva Gurjar, who was brutally killed in a



**"We often carry out raids in several districts in one go. This stuns the criminals and gives confidence to the people."**

**DINESH M.N.**

*Additional Director General,  
Crime, Rajasthan Police*

gang war in April 2022, would often upload reels and glimpses of his lifestyle that cast him in the image of a Hindi film villain. He had more than 200,000 followers on Instagram. "Some criminals had become so bold that they publicised their murders on social media," says Dinesh. In Bhiwadi, two criminals claimed responsibility for a murder on social media as did the two men who had killed a tailor in a hate crime in Udaipur last year.

As a deterrent, Rajasthan's cops have now lodged over 350 cases against

the followers, including under the Arms Act for displaying weapons on social media, and arrested 56 of them. About a 1,000 were also put in preventive detention for a day or two. Parents of a few, especially minors, were called to police stations to ask them to counsel their children. This has seen results. The number of Facebook followers of Rohit Godara, Bishnoi's aide who had claimed responsibility for Theth's murder, has nearly halved.

Currently, the police have half a dozen gangs in their sights. Besides the Bishnoi gang, other prominent criminal groups include the Lala gang in Chittorgarh who are into narcotics and the Manju gang of Jodhpur, also into narcotics as well as extortion. Then there's the Jabbar gang in Pali that faces 90 cases of real estate encroachment, extortion and conspiracy to murder among other charges, says Dinesh. On Gehlot's orders, police have identified 2,471 ill-gotten properties of such criminals and are passing on the information to the income tax and other authorities. The unauthorised properties of a few have also been razed. "We have a long way to go," admits Mishra, adding that there will be proactive policing and no let-up in raids.

But Diya Kumari, the BJP MP from Rajsamand, describes the recent crackdown as "too little, too late". "It is shocking the way criminals have got a strong footing in Rajasthan—a state known for peace and hospitality," says the MP, alleging that police were lax earlier in dealing with criminals because of the "connivance or patronage of Congress leaders". "After what happened in Churu and Udaipur, we can see that one or two mass raids have failed to act as a deterrent," she adds. On April 26, a day after the statewide raids, three men fired 15 rounds outside a jewellery shop in Churu, injuring a cop deployed for security of its owner who had received an extortion call. The very next day, seven cops on an operation to nab a notorious criminal were injured after being attacked by a mob in Udaipur. In the crosshairs themselves, the Rajasthan Police seem to be in it for the long haul. ■



LIVING | DIGITAL DETOX

# A VILLAGE SHOWS THE WAY

**A small hamlet in Maharashtra takes a collective break from TV and smartphone screens to rediscover the simple pleasures of life**

**By DHAVAL KULKARNI** *in Sangli*

**E**

VERY EVENING, AT SEVEN SHARP, A SIREN ATOP THE BHAIRAVNATH TEMPLE IN Mohityanche Vadgaon, a village in Maharashtra's Sangli district around 350 km from state capital Mumbai, blares for a full 45 seconds. The sound of sirens is nothing unusual here in the state's sugar mill belt, where they signal the start of the work shift or its end every day. But the 7 pm temple siren comes bearing a different cue for Mohityanche Vadgaon's residents. Earlier, when they needed





Photographs by MANDAR DEODHAR

## THE GREAT OUTDOORS

People play volleyball during 'digital detox' hours in Mohityanche Vadgaon

to wind down after a hard day's work, they would scroll through social media, watching the latest prime-time show or daily soap operas on the TV. Not anymore. Now, as the evening siren goes off, the villagers, mostly farmers or sugar mill workers, have to get off their screens, be it the television or mobile phone, for the next hour and a half. Children can use the time to study, youngsters can read, or people can simply spend some quality time with each other or with their families. It has been nine months now since the 3,500-odd residents of the village have been practising this daily 'digital detox', so much so that it has inspired the neighbouring villages to follow suit.

"For two years after the pandemic began, children were confined to their homes," says Vijay Mohite, the former sarpanch of Mohityanche Vadgaon. "Students attended school online, which meant that for over an hour and a half, they were glued to their mobile screens. Even families that were not well-off had to buy a smartphone for their children. However, this habit persisted well after offline classes restarted." The screen time of the adults, too, had shot up, and its fallout became evident when social and familial interactions and children's learning outcomes, as well as their health, started getting affected. Children were getting irritable and threw tantrums when parents took their phones. "What was more worrying was that they could surf the internet and access content inappropriate for their age," says Mohite. Teachers in the village also expressed concern about children's screen addiction and the declining attention span in the classroom. The qualitative decline was obvious, and measures like appointing private tutors or conducting extra classes were also not yielding results.

It was then that Mohite decided to try a community-wide 'digital detox'. "In rural areas, houses are smaller and children have no separate rooms per se to study. Often, they are forced to study in the same room

where the TV is on, which distracts them. The 7-8.30 pm slot was chosen because it is prime time and that's when daily soaps and dramas are aired," says Mohite.

The members of the village came around to the idea soon enough, and on August 15, 2022, India's 75th Independence Day, Mohityanche Vadgaon became the first village in the country to go on a collective detox. Some did flout the digital curfew initially. So, a squad was set up to locate and warn these defaulters. Some of the children also did not hesitate to tell on recalcitrant elders in the family. Violators were threatened with a fine, but it was never actually levied. "After a week or so, the people themselves realised the benefits of the initiative," says Mohite.

Sushma Misal, a Class 10 student in the village, is one of them. "Initially," she says, "I found it difficult to keep my mobile aside or deal with the television being switched off, and would start using my phone a few minutes before 8.30 pm. But gradually, the digital detox grew on me. I am confident of getting better marks in my Class 10 examinations because of this."

M.A. Mane, principal of the Vidyarthi Vikas Vidyalaya High School, which has around 450 students, says that learning outcomes have improved. "Students take the initiative now and study on their own," he says. The school, on the whole, has seen a qualitative im-

provement. In fact, teachers say concentration levels and attention spans have visibly improved. So much so, students from neighbouring villages like Asad and Ambag have voluntarily adopted the detox regimen.

Many villagers claim that they have either cut down their overall TV usage or have stopped seeing it altogether. Abhijit Mohite, 23, who recently completed his master's degree in science, says, "Earlier, there was no designated time for students to study.... Now that televisions are switched off at prime time, people speak to each other at home and there is a sense of belonging. These conversations were stunted earlier as life revolved around television shows."

Pratik Mohite, 27, who has a master's degree in alcohol technology and works at a distillery in a sugar factory, says that though there are no children in his house, the initiative has helped him stay off the screen

**RESIDENTS OF  
MOHITYANCHE  
VADGAON SAY  
THAT THEIR  
QUALITY OF LIFE  
HAS IMPROVED  
SINCE THE  
DIGITAL DETOX**



and focus on reading to enhance his professional and technical knowledge. Then there is Komal Misal, a housewife, who says she has started trying out new recipes at home thanks to the time off from TV serials.

Inspired by such outcomes, other villages in the region, such as Vahagaon and Chachegaon in Satara, Peth Vadgaon and Talsande in Kolhapur, and the Madha town in Solapur, have started following the detox model or are on their way to do so. Already, says sarpanch Mohite, he has received calls from many other village representatives. Vishwajeet Kadam, former minister and Congress MLA from Palus-Kadegaon in Sangli, in whose constituency Mohityanche Vadgaon falls, says they are trying to promote the initiative further. "We are promoting it in the two talukas (in the constituency)... I hope this initiative catches on," he says.

**T**hat shouldn't be difficult. The digital detox programme also aligns with the Sangli district council's ongoing project: it has been developing model schools in every village of the district and aims to involve parents in the education of their children. Jitendra Dudi, chief executive officer (CEO) of the Sangli zilla parishad, says that they held a conference of representatives from all villages to inform them about the initiative. So far, around seven villages in Sangli district have adopted this regimen, and more are expected to join in. "The intention is to help parents focus on the education of their children."

The results are also beginning to show in other villages that have adopted the programme, and it won't be surprising if such a digital detox becomes a way of life. Sangram Adhikrao Pawar, the sarpanch of Vahagaon village in Satara's Karad taluka, says, "We first conducted a survey in the village to assess if we should go ahead with the plan. We were wary about how women would respond, since they usually watch television at that time, but they were receptive to the idea to ensure that their children could get a brighter future." The results in Vahagaon, which has around 5,000 residents and started the digital detox regimen on October 12 last year, are telling. Anandi Dilip Pawar, a gram panchayat member and mother of two, says that her daughter, who studies in Class 8, has secured a scholarship because she was able to focus on studies, thanks to the television being switched off. Likewise, another resident, Sujata Pujari, says her son Kanishka, who recently appeared for his Class 12 examinations, has been able to study better. Then there's Ranjana Pawar, who says that she has now taken to reading books instead of watching TV. And while Harshavarshan Nalawade, a Class 4 student, says that he managed to stand first in his class, his sister Shreya (Class 8) says that she can under-



**Abhijit Mohite**, 23, resident of Mohityanche Vadgaon village, Sangli district

**“PEOPLE SPEAK TO EACH OTHER MORE NOW, THERE'S A SENSE OF BELONGING. EARLIER, LIFE REVOLVED AROUND TV SHOWS”**

**“THE DIGITAL DETOX HELPED WHEN MY SON KANISHKA WAS IN CLASS 12. HE COULD STUDY BETTER”**



**Sujata Pujari**, 40, resident of Vahagaon village, Satara district



**M.A. Mane**, 53, principal, Vidyarthi Vikas Vidyalaya High School, Mohityanche Vadgaon

**“STUDENTS NOW STUDY ON THEIR OWN INITIATIVE. THE SCHOOL, ON A WHOLE, HAS SEEN QUALITATIVE IMPROVEMENT”**

stand subjects better now. The daily arguments over the TV remote have also come to an end, she adds laughingly. All this reflects in the classroom too: Mangesh Tate, a teacher at the local secondary school, notes that he has seen a marked improvement in the handwriting of his students. Elsewhere in Kolhapur's Talsande village, Shivaji Patil, the former deputy sarpanch, says that he has started reading more since he went on the digital detox. "Senior citizens in our village have gone back to reading books, a habit that had almost died out due to television," he says.

Back in Mohityanche Vadgaon, the siren is ringing again. It's 8.30 pm and the end of the digital curfew. But Rida Mujawar, only in Class I, continues to study, refusing to even have dinner till she completes her lessons. It's a different kind of addiction, and a welcome one. ■





WILDLIFE | ASIATIC LION

# PRIDE AND PO

Rising lion numbers and corresponding **human and industrial expansion** have led to increased **man-animal conflict** in Gir. Everyone agrees the lions need to move. Whether it can be outside Gujarat is where things remain stuck

By Jumana Shah and Rahul Noronha

#### CATWALK

A lioness crosses a road in Liliya village, Amreli district, in the Greater Gir region, while villagers oblivious to her presence walk on



RAJAN JOSHI

# LITICS

# T

**THE THRIVING POPULATION OF ASIATIC LIONS IN GIR HAS BEEN A WILDLIFE SUCCESS STORY** for several years now. Ironically, this very triumph of conservation has now become somewhat of a liability. The number of Asiatic lions has steadily risen over the past five decades in the last abode of the species. They increased from 284 in 1990 to 674 as per the 2020 census. But human population, industrialisation and urbanisation have also risen in tandem, leading to an inevitable man-lion conflict that is proving to be increasingly detrimental both to the lions and the humans. The lions have also fallen prey to deadly diseases such as the canine distemper virus by virtue of being cooped up in a single geographical region.

To deal with this compound set of problems, several deliberations have been held to relocate the lions to other sites, chiefly the Kuno National Park in Madhya Pradesh. But Gujarat has been stalling the effort on some pretext or the other, despite the Supreme Court order to the effect in 2013. The state has been reluctant to part with its lions, asserting that they are part of the Gujarati *asmita* (pride). Perhaps to end that stalemate, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced Project Lion on the lines of Project Tiger on India's 74th Independence Day in 2020. As part of this ambitious plan, three "gene pool" sites would be set up at Rampara in Saurashtra, and Sakkarbaug and Satveerada in Junagadh for breeding lions. Six new potential sites have also been identified, including the Madhav National Park and Gandhi Sagar Wildlife Sanctuary (WLS) in MP, the Sitamata WLS, the Mukundra Hills Tiger Reserve and the Kumbhalgarh WLS in Rajasthan, and the Jessore-Balaram Ambaji WLS in Gujarat. However, the Gujarat government has come up with its own solution this year. Their lions will still not go out of Gujarat, if they have to be relocated, they could be sent to Barda, another sanctuary within Gujarat! It is not the solution it is being made out to be, say wildlife experts.

Located around 100 kilometres from Gir, 192.31 sq. km of forest area in Barda was declared a sanctuary in 1979. A report prepared by the Wildlife Institute of India (WII), 'Lion@2047:



## GOING NOWHERE: LION TRANSLOCATION THROUGH THE DECADES

A vision for Amrutkal', talks about developing the Barda-Alech Hills and the coastal forests as part of a long-term vision for lion conservation and assesses that it has a carrying capacity of 40 adult and sub-adult lions. "Unlike Gir," says Nityanand Srivastava, chief wildlife warden of Gujarat, "this is an open forest area with pockets developed as a *vidi* (grassland). Up to two lions have naturally migrated there. They are radio-collared, we are monitoring them. We are confident that this region will emerge as a preferred habitat for lions. The water and flora-fauna ecosystem for the herbivore prey base is sufficient."

**W**ildlife experts, however, are of the opinion that while moving 40 lions to Barda is a welcome temporary measure, it does not constitute a long-term solution. "The Barda region is contiguous with the existing lion population, so it does not mitigate the risks to the species due to natural calamities or infectious diseases. Nor does it help resolve the human-lion conflict. So, what is Barda seen as a solution for?" asks Bengaluru-based Ravi Chellam, wildlife biologist and conservation scientist. Y.V. Jhala, former dean at the WII, says, "We have to use genetically diverse lions as founders of a new population established far from the Saurashtra landscape. Within Gujarat, the wildlife sanctuaries of Jessore and Balaram along with forests of Ambaji and Shaymalaji are ideal after some incentivised village relocation. Lions should be brought back to all parts of India where they historically used to roam," he adds.

This is not the first time that Barda has come up as an alternative habitat for lions. It was among the five sites that were assessed during a 1993 workshop on the Population and Habitat Viability Assessment of the Asiatic Lion. Barda had then come up short on account of water, prey and forage scarcity, besides encroachment. Other wildlife sanctuaries—Kumbhalgarh, Sitamata, Darrah Jawahar Sagar—did not make the cut either, whether for

inadequate prey base, unsuitable terrain or human interference, and Kuno Palpur was found to be the most suitable place for relocation.

To welcome the new guests, the state of Madhya Pradesh had in fact set up a separate wildlife division for Kuno, increasing the protected area for wildlife to 1,269 square kilometres. A suitable prey base was also prepared. Some 1,545 families of the Sahariya tribes in 24 villages were relocated. However, when the time came to shift the lions, in 2006, the Gujarat government refused, saying the lions were perfectly fine where they were and translocation would put them under pressure. They also said Kuno had an inadequate prey base for lions, and that MP did not have a good record in protecting its tigers at the Panna reserve.

Tired of the continued objections of the Gujarat government, the Supreme Court on April 16, 2013, categorically ruled in favour of lion relocation to Kuno. But still the state kept stalling the proposition, and the lions kept staying on in Gir. It was in this context that PM Modi's Project Lion appeared to be a step forward. The objective remained much the same—to manage growing

**1957:** Three lions from a zoo translocated to Chandraprabha sanctuary near Varanasi in UP. After steady increase, they slowly die out

**October 1979:** The Gujarat government writes to the Centre to find alternative habitats for the Asiatic lion

**1995:** Kuno sanctuary identified as most suitable for lion translocation. Other habitats discussed are Sita Mata, Darrah sanctuaries in Rajasthan

**1998-2000:** 24 villages with 1,545 families from the Sahariya community, Gurjars and Yadavs are moved out of Kuno to create an inviolate habitat for lions

**March 2023:** MoEFCC tells SC that lions can't be brought to Kuno as cheetahs are already there. Relook of lion translocation project in six months

**Sept. 2022-Feb. 2023:** Eight cheetahs are brought to Kuno from Namibia; later 12 brought from South Africa

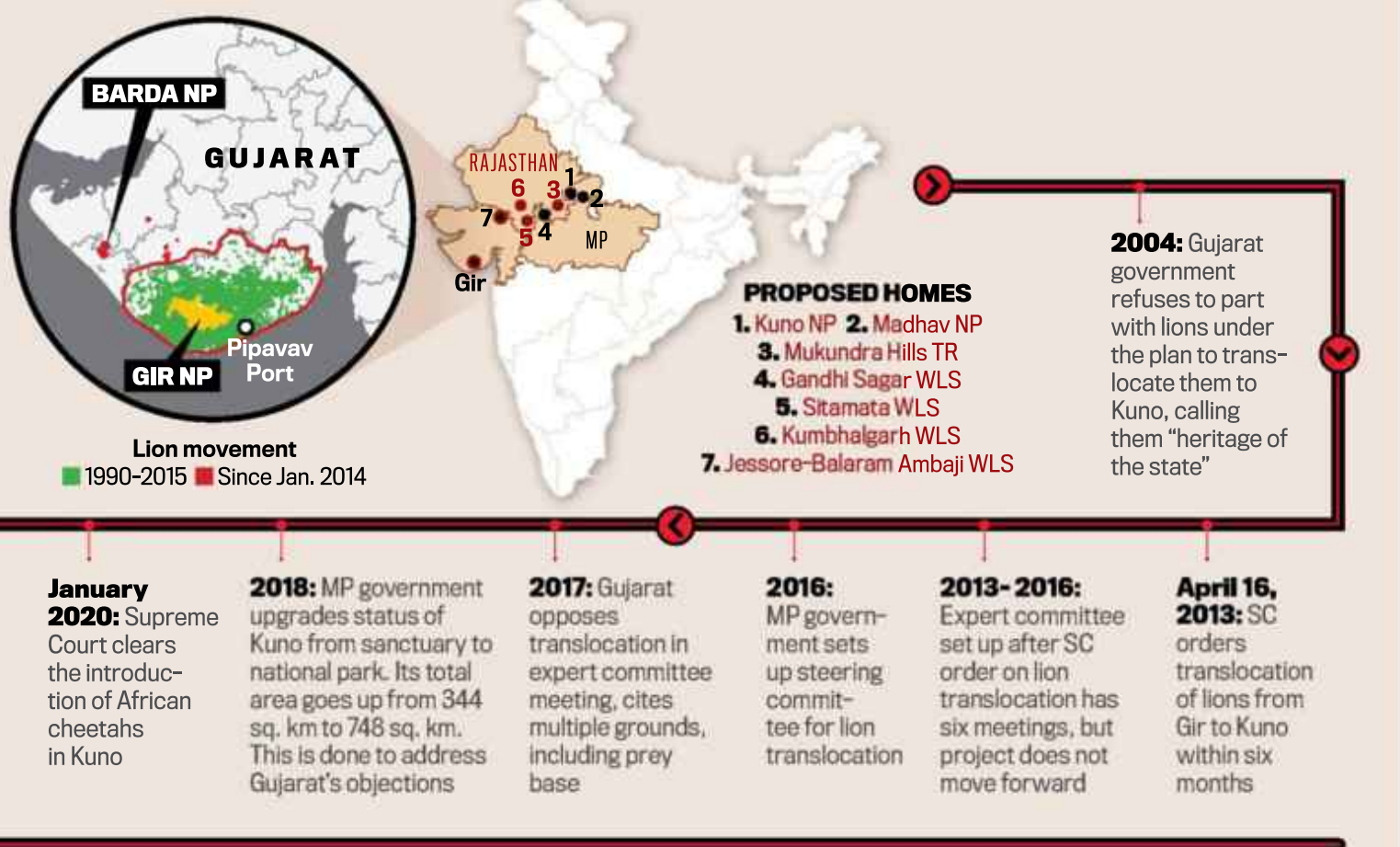
**August 2020:** Project Lion announced; identifies six new lion sanctuaries—two in MP (Gandhi Sagar, Madhav), three in Rajasthan (Sita Mata, Kumbhalgarh, Mukundra) and one in Gujarat (Jessore-Balaram Ambaji)



**“ RISKS TO LIONS FROM NATURAL DISASTERS AND DISEASES REMAIN IN BARDAS AS IT LIES NEAR EXISTING LION POPULATION ”**

**—RAVI CHELLAM**  
Conservation scientist

lion populations, secure and manage lion habitats and mitigate human-lion conflict. Among proposed activities were habitat augmentation, development of peripheral forests and lion corridors. The 'Lion@2047: A vision for Amrutkal' document also advocated the creation of additional free-ranging lion populations in Gujarat and elsewhere. But, strangely, it did not mention the six sites outlined in the PM's plans. Highly-placed sources claim that these sites



were never examined from a scientific viewpoint either by the state or by the Union ministry of environment, forests and climate change (MoEFCC). Asked about their status, S.P. Yadav, member secretary, National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA), says, "The new report is yet to be released."

Things, therefore, remained where they were, as the MoEFCC and NTCA now cited the introduction of the Namibian cheetahs in Kuno as the reason for not going ahead with the pending transfer of lions there. In a submission made to the SC in March 2023, the Centre, besides painting the proposed introduction of lions as a threat to cheetahs in Kuno, mentioned Gujarat's stellar record of lion conservation as the reason for not going ahead with the transfer. Further, the Supreme Court was informed that the Centre would take a fresh look at the translocation of lions to Kuno within six months. The submission could be an attempt to end the decades-long quest for a second home for *Panthera leo leo*. The MoEFCC also stated: "Although the cheetah and lion are known to co-exist in Africa...competitively subordinate and vulnerable carnivores (cheetahs)

should be released prior to dominant species (lions)."

While the non-compliance with the court order has had conservationists upset, the latest move by the MoEFCC has added to their frustrations. "There is a standing order of the SC that has directed that the lions be translocated to Kuno. There is no reason for the state and Union governments to have delayed it for 10 years. All possible options of appeal have been exhausted by the Gujarat government," says Chellam.



**“WE ARE CONFIDENT THAT BARDA WILL EMERGE AS A HABITAT FOR LIONS. THREE LIONS HAVE NATURALLY MIGRATED THERE”**

**-NITYANAND SRIVASTAVA**  
Chief wildlife warden, Gujarat

Meanwhile, the MP government's stand on the lion translocation project has been curiously muted. While Gujarat has been aggressively opposing the move, the MP government has not been pursuing it. After the Centre's submission at the apex court, there is no clarity if MP would oppose it in court. But 2023 is an election year in MP, and according to the Congress, the transfer of lions at Kuno, with or without the cheetahs, could have created jobs in one of the poorest regions of the state.

With the cheetahs in Kuno, you could say that MP's effort and expense in developing Kuno for a big cat reintroduction have not gone in vain. But the barrage of problems that impelled the WII to advise translocation of lions in the first place have come to a head in Gujarat. According to data released in the Gujarat legislative assembly recently, seven humans have died and 40 injured in lion attacks in two years. Such deaths numbered five in 2022, a rise from two in the previous year. The victims included two children sleeping alongside their parents in a village adjoining agricultural land. Given that 2011-2021 saw around 12 incidents on an average annually and



The entrance at the Kuno National Park. Newly translocated cheetahs are the main point of interest, though lions, too, are represented



MUJEEB FARUQUI

about two fatal attacks each year, the sharp increase in the number of attacks itself has alarmed the local population and forest officers.

Srivastav, however, says that the human-lion conflict is not a serious concern as the lion is an “intelligent animal and can coexist with humans”. “Humans are attacked as lions mistake them for prey, like when sleeping kids were dragged away or women cutting grass were attacked,” he adds. The Gujarat government, he claims, has plans to engage with local communities and spread awareness about lion behaviour. “We are acquiring tracts of wasteland and creating a safe lion corridor in districts like Bhavnagar, Amreli, Botad and Surendranagar,” says Srivastav.

**W**ildlife expert Revtubha Raizada, who conducts awareness camps on how to coexist with lions in Keshod in Junagadh, thinks humans are to blame for the lion attacks. “There is a way to behave when one comes face to face with lions and we regularly conduct workshops on the topic,” he says. Wildlife activist Rajan Joshi says there is a shortage of ground staff in the forest department. “This leads to ineffective monitoring of lions, thus people are not alerted,” he adds.

The rise in human deaths due to lion attacks is the proverbial tip of the iceberg, though. As their population rises, lions are walking out of protected forest areas into peri-urban areas and agricultural land. Prides of lions

## THE PROPOSED TRANSLOCATION OF LIONS IN KUNO IS A THREAT TO CHEETAHS THERE, THE UNION MINISTRY TOLD THE SUPREME COURT IN MARCH

sauntering through small Saurashtra towns have become a common sight. In 2010, with a population of 411, the lions roamed over 20,000 sq. km. Today, with numbers touching 700, they range over 30,000 sq. km in the Saurashtra peninsula spanning nine districts—Junagadh, Amreli, Porbandar, Rajkot, Bhavnagar, Jamnagar, Gir Somnath, Botad and Surendranagar. It’s a clear sign that Gir’s carrying capacity—the maximum sustainable numbers of a species in a specific environment—for lions is saturated.

Rampant industrial activity in the Saurashtra region as also the ever-spreading tentacles of rail connectivity are not leaving the lions with any undisturbed sanctuary. There are 14 ports on the Saurashtra coastline. During the monsoon of 2022, five lions created a scare at Pipavav Port as they sauntered on the premises late at night. CCTV grabs showed a terrified security guard

locking himself in his cabin. Later, the lions were captured and released in Gir. Pipavav has its own broad gauge railway connectivity. Plans are afoot to enhance the capacity of other ports, which will require better rail and road connectivity. This translates to more highways and rail tracks passing through existing lion habitats around Gir. In 2019, the state government admitted to the Gujarat High Court that a stretch of the Pipavav-Surendranagar line passes through lion habitat in Amreli district. It said it had constructed chain-link fencing around some stretches of the track. However, at least one male lion died in 2022 after jumping over the fence.

In 2018, the Gujarat High Court took suo motu cognizance of high unnatural lion deaths resulting from accidents like train hits and electrocution. Amicus curiae Hemang Shah says the matter is not disposed of as the scope has expanded to ensuring the lions’ welfare and habitat management. “I have raised the issue of illegal mining and conversion of narrow to broad gauge railway tracks in protected areas, getting the government to admit lion deaths due to CDV and ensuring they are vaccinated and collared for monitoring,” Shah says. Indeed, a big concern with the entire population of lions concentrated in one region is that an outbreak of infectious disease could cause significant casualties. In 1994, an outbreak of CDV killed around 1,000 of the 3,000 lions at the Serengeti National Park in Tanzania. Between 2018 and 2020, at least 48 lions died due to CDV and later Babesiosis in Gujarat.

Outside protected areas, there is no consistent prey base for the lions, which leads to attacks on livestock. At least one human death took place when a man was trying to save his goat from a lion. There are natural disasters too—in the 2015 Saurashtra floods, 12 lions were killed in Amreli.

Increasing human population, the concomitant rise in economic activity and industrialisation in Gujarat’s lion habitats are brushing against an increase in lion numbers. The solution lies in collaborative effort, not standing on pride. ■



KSHMR RETURNS  
TO HIS  
ROOTS PG 62

DOSEBAI COWASJEE  
JESSAWALLA: A  
MEMOIR PG 66

SAAS BAHU AUR  
FLAMINGO: ROGUE  
FAMILY PG 65

Q&A  
WITH SIMA  
TAPARIA PG 68

# LEISURE

MAGAZINE KING

MUSIC

## West Meets East

Indian-American rapper and singer **Raja Kumari**'s new album shows signs of her sonic and personal evolution

**The Bridge**  
is more pop and  
R&B-flavoured  
than Raja Kumari's  
other hip-hop hits;  
there's also a more  
introspective aspect  
to her lyrics



# I

Indian-American rapper and singer Raja Kumari's new album, *The Bridge*, heralds the next stage of her sonic evolution. Compared to her previous work, there's a more introspective aspect to the lyrics, while musically, it's more pop and R&B-flavoured than her most well-known hip-hop hits.

She chose to title the collection *The Bridge* because "not only is it bridging the West back to the East, it's also the bridge from who I was to where I am now," says Kumari over a Zoom call from her home in Los Angeles. "At the beginning of the album, there's a lot more rap, it's a little heavier, and then it just transforms to....a softer space."

Like many performing artists, Kumari—whose real name is Svetha Rao and who was born and raised in the US—re-evaluated her career during the pandemic. She spent the first few months in isolation in her apartment in LA and was "forced to deal with myself and all of my idiosyncrasies". This led her to realise that she was projecting a

## LEISURE

certain persona. "As someone who studies spirituality and Hindu mythology, I have this obsession with Ardhanarishvara, this balance between masculine and feminine energy," says Kumari. "I understood that I was [tapping into] my masculine [side]." The approach worked in her favour while navigating the male-dominated music industry, which is even more patriarchal in India than in the West. "I had to be so aggressive to cut through, but it was overloading my spirit. It was making me combative in different ways. [With this album], balance and integration has been the goal."

*The Bridge* has been released on Godmother Records, the independent label Kumari founded in 2021 after years of working with major music companies. From 2016 to 2019, she was signed to Sony Music-owned Epic, and from 2020 to 2021, to Mass Appeal India, which had a partnership with Universal Music. "I've learned from every situation," says Kumari, who has been candid about the tussles she's had with former labels. "I can't go back and say I wish I didn't do it. Because every opportunity provided me with something. I don't want to be submitted to all these random opinions about how to package



**"IT WAS TIMING, LUCK, ATTITUDE AND MUSIC," SAYS RAJA KUMARI ON BEING ABLE TO BREAK THROUGH THE DESI HIP-HOP SCENE DOMINATED BY MALE ARTISTS RAPPING IN HINDI OR REGIONAL LANGUAGES**

me." Chief among those battles has been exactly how much to project her "Indianness" while marketing her as a global artist. An incident she has called out repeatedly in in-



**H**e's one of the top electronic dance music artists in the world, but for many Indian hip-hop fans, he's the man behind one of the most anticipated albums of 2023. Indian-American DJ-producer KSHMR (pronounced Kashmir), a.k.a. Niles Hollowell-Dhar, has been putting up pictures of himself recording with desi MCs on his social media for almost a year now, and their fans have been waiting to hear the results ever since.

KSHMR, a first-generation immigrant whose performance name pays tribute to his ancestral



## A CLASSY COLLAB

Raja Kumari performing with Ali Sethi at the Coachella festival

interviews involved being told that she would be given a larger budget for her video if she didn't wear a bindi.

Widely regarded as one of the most successful rappers in India, and the country's foremost female MC, Kumari's string of achievements include headlining the Bacardi NH7 Weekender festival in Pune, judging the first season of reality TV hip-hop competition series *MTV Hustle*, and a cameo in the film *Gully Boy*, all of which she did in 2019. Earlier this year, she played the Walkers & Co. tour, which marked American R&B singer John Legend's debut concerts in Mumbai and New Delhi.

But when she moved to Mumbai in 2017, she already had an impressive CV that boasted songwriter

credits on a pair of 2014 releases—pop-punk band Fall Out Boy's US top 10 smash 'Centuries' and rapper Iggy Azalea's Grammy-nominated album *The New Classic*.

Kumari's success in India as a female artist rapping in English was notable in a scene where the most popular hip-hop acts are male stars rhyming in Hindi or a regional language. She believes she was able to break through for a number of reasons. "It was [a combination of the] timing [of hip-hop blowing up in India], luck, attitude and music," says Kumari. "I came with that all-American attitude, like I'll pull myself up [by] my bootstraps, anything is possible. I didn't know about the limitations that were societally supposed to be placed on me. So I would just walk through them."

While she's an established name in this country, where until recently she was spending the majority of the year, she's lesser known to the US audience outside of the diaspora. In a shot at global stardom, she decided to return to the US and visit India only for the festival season.

Kumari is now represented by

international talent agency WME, through which she scored a slot at the inaugural edition of the Middle East leg of popular UK rap festival Wireless, which was held in Abu Dhabi in March. Just a couple of weeks ago, she joined Ali Sethi on stage at the Coachella festival to duet with him on 'Pasoori'. She's also working with Latium Entertainment, the company formed by Charles Chavez, best known as Cuban-American rapper Pitbull's former manager. "He was present during the Latin explosion," says Kumari. "So instead of me convincing American people constantly that India is about to break, it's like having a brown person that was there, on the team. I have to fight him so much less."

On Kumari's list of long-term goals are a number-one hit on the US charts and a Grammy win. For now, her immediate focus is her new album, the response to which she says she is equanimous about. "I would love for this to be the album that everybody discovered me through but I don't put a lot of pressure on my art anymore." ■

Amit Gurbaxani

home, says we can expect the collection to be out in the third quarter. Titled *Karam*, it's a concept album based around a doomed protagonist whose story is told through a series of interludes that link the 13 tracks. It will feature, among others, rappers HanuMankind, King, MC Stan, Raftaar, Raja Kumari and Seedhe Maut, and singer-songwriter Zaeden.

*Karam* will be a rare instance of acts belonging to different camps in desi hip-hop coming together outside of a festival. But KSHMR says the artists he invited readily agreed to

join the project. "I never got the impression that somebody wouldn't be part of the album because somebody else is involved," he says. "Though there are a lot of beefs in Indian hip-hop, there's a lot of respect as well."

KSHMR discovered our home-grown hip-hop scene after watching the 2019 Hindi film *Gully Boy*. The movie inspired the musician, who started out wanting to be a rapper before he switched to

electronic music, to return to his hip-hop roots and collaborate with the country's hottest rap stars. "It blew my mind," he says. "It was like this new fire ignited in me."

He's previewed a few of *Karam*'s songs during recent live shows in India, at the Zomato Feeding India Concert in December 2022 and the Road To Ultra festival in April. The response, he says, has been "really, really good". Based on comments on his Instagram,

some listeners are less pleased with the inclusion of popular Indian film hits, such as 'Doobey' from *Gehraiyaan* (2022) and 'Oo Antava' from *Pushpa: The Rise* (2021) in his sets. However, he doesn't plan to stop playing them.

"Some people say they've come to see a KSHMR show, [so] they don't want to hear the same tracks they always hear," he says. "It's fun for me though. To play a Bollywood track mixed with my own and see the crowd go crazy keeps [things] exciting. I'm going to keep doing it." ■

Amit Gurbaxani

**KARAM** is a rare instance of acts belonging to different camps in desi hip-hop coming together outside of a music festival



**S**hort story lends itself to cinema. It's difficult to adapt the novel into film and this is true the world over," says B. Jeyamohan, the celebrated Tamil author, literary critic and screenplay writer who stands on the cusp of wider fame today with several of his works being translated into English and film adaptations achieving popular success. His short story collection *Aram* (2011), translated by Priyamvada as *Stories of the True*, was published in 2022, and his 2003 novel *Ezham Ulagam*, translated by Suchitra Ramachandran as *The Abyss*, came out last month. Jeyamohan has been writing films for over two decades now, working with filmmakers like Shankar, Mani Ratnam and Bala. Vetrimaaran's *Viduthalai Part 1* (2023), inspired by Jeyamohan's short story 'Thunaivan', released in March. There is another horse in the race—the adaptation of Kalki R. Krishnamurthy's book *Ponniyin Selvan* (1954), for which Jeyamohan worked with Ratnam and Elango Kumaravel. The second part of the film released in April, after the first became a monster hit last year.

An epic like *Ponniyin Selvan* presents a unique task. "We can't condense, we need all the major characters and moments," says Jeyamohan. However, one of the main critiques for the film

was the way characters meet despite the screenplay circumventing Kalki's overwritten portions and avoiding contrivances. Jeyamohan says that's part of Kalki's style: "Kalki was influenced by Dumas and George W.M. Reynolds." There are three things that need refinement when writing a screenplay for the modern audience, says Jeyamohan. "During Kalki's time, realism had not evolved as a school of aesthetics. People met and events occurred as coincidence." Second, he says, there was a lot of eavesdropping in such fiction. It wasn't true to life but characters overheard each other all the time. This can't happen in a film made today. "Third, emotions were conveyed through dramatic monologues. But we kept a few, like Aditha Karikalan's lament about Nandini." The makers had to invent scenarios where the inner traits of characters could translate visually.

Says Jeyamohan, "There's no war in the book, only talks about war. But we need scenes of war to show Karikalan's anger and warrior nature that the book sings paeans about."

Even though the films take the

liberty to let viewers connect some dots, Jeyamohan believes the share of people who have read the book is still quite small. "A film can't be made just for them. We have youth who watch movies from around the world....adults who have a healthy curiosity towards Tamil history. We can't make a *Baahubali* for them, Arunmozhivarman can't hit 10 enemy soldiers in a single whiplash. That'd be comical. Then there are readers who need the essence of the novel and the characters."

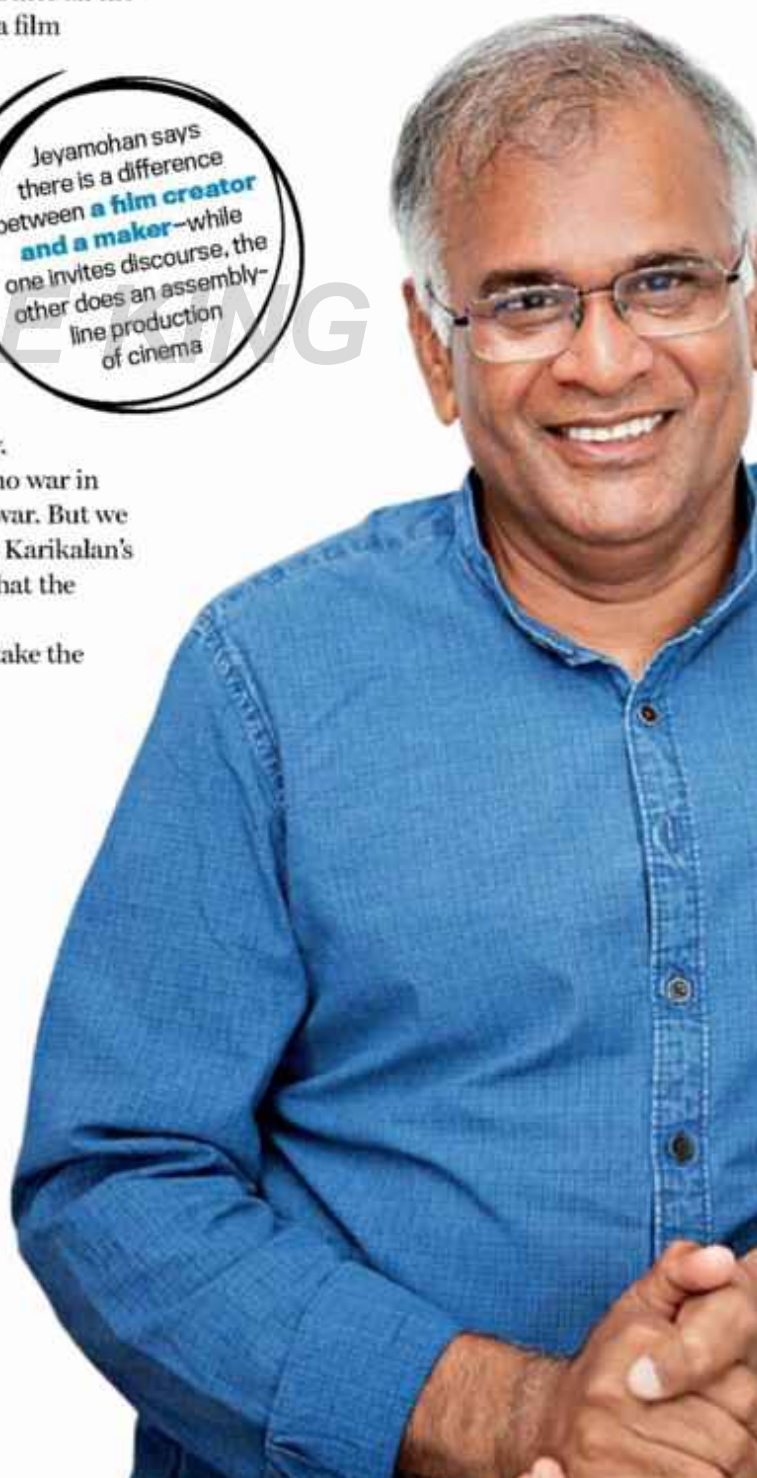
Recent adaptations of Tamil literature as larger-than-life popular films



CINEMA

# Scripting a Screen Epic

Noted Tamil author **B. Jeyamohan** talks about the challenges in adapting an epic literary work like *Ponniyin Selvan* into a film



have largely been successful. A few years ago, while talking about Mari Selvaraj's *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018), Jeyamohan had drawn a distinction between a film creator and a maker—one invites discourse, while the other does an assembly-line production of cinema. That view seemed dangerously close to dismissing film critic Manny Farber's famous theory of White Elephant Art vs Termite Art. Now, asked whether Tamil literary adaptations can be successful only as popular cinema, Jeyamohan cites two works. "*Mullum Malarum* [1978] was by a creator, adapted from Uma Chandran's novel. Or consider *Gone with the Wind* [1939]. It is not a literary classic, but the cinema adaptation is an artistic work. Both approaches are possible. It depends on the author-director," he says. ■

Aditya Shrikrishna

## ENTERTAINMENT

# ROGUE FAMILY



Homi Adajania's **Saas Bahu aur Flamingo** is an offbeat tale of four women involved in a shady trade

**T**he women in Homi Adajania-directed *Saas Bahu aur Flamingo* (streaming on Disney+ Hotstar from May 5) are feisty, occasionally funny, and also happen to run a drug cartel. If the series seems like a call to 'smash the patriarchy' and one that tries to give a spin to the staid *saas-bahu* dynamic seen in TV soaps so far, for Adajania, the idea wasn't that. "It wasn't like 'Hey, let me make a statement about women.' For me, they are as powerful as other gender preferences," says Adajania. "But I knew it [*saas-bahu* shows] keeps regurgitating in the space of kitchen politics between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law."

Not that the show has none of the tropes of the genre. One can sense a simmering tension and discover secrets in *Saas Bahu aur Flamingo*. It's why Adajania describes it as a portrait of "a dysfunctional family living in a dystopian land that is far removed from society at large". Adajania's she-warriors

include Dimple Kapadia, Radhika Madan, Angira Dhar and Isha Talwar.

The project marks Adajania's fifth collaboration with Kapadia, making her a recurring feature in his short oeuvre. "She is a beautiful friend and a blank canvas for me.... She has an implicit trust in me, which is a privilege. She knows I'd never compromise with her character. Therefore, she is willing to push the envelope." Kapadia also appears in his next, the feature *Murder Mubarak*.

Unsurprisingly, the show's most compelling character is Savitri, played by Kapadia, who essays the matriarch *saas*. "You realise that her only currency is trust," says Adajania. "She is protective of you and generous, but if you cross her path, she will cut your tongue out regardless of who you are." It's this duality that adds to the drama.

Adajania's is not the first show on Disney+ Hotstar about women involved in a messy trade. Both

*Aarya* (2020–) and *Human* (2022) have already had amoral female protagonists. *Saas Bahu aur Flamingo* may also remind people of shows such as *Breaking Bad* (2008–2013) and *Weeds* (2005–2012). However, Adajania, who would rather read a book, go scuba diving or climb a mountain, says he hasn't seen either. "But I do have a crew who binge-watch all of this. So, when I suggest a killer idea, they remind me it has already been done before."

With *Saas Bahu aur Flamingo*, Adajania becomes the latest filmmaker to enter the OTT world. He seems to have enjoyed the liberty the medium affords him, though he is also conscious of the responsibility that comes with it. "OTT opens up the playing field to exploring various genres and ideas," he says. But, he adds, "Just because it is not as censored we should not be chucking in stuff for shock value. It would be akin to shooting ourselves in the foot." ■

Suhani Singh

The show is **not your average saas-bahu** tale that's been seen in Indian TV soaps so far, but it does have some of the tropes of the genre

### DANGEROUS WOMEN

A poster of *Saas Bahu aur Flamingo*; (top) Homi Adajania





# Memoirs of a BOOKS Parsi Daughter

THE INSPIRING STORY OF **DOSEBAI COWASJEE JESSAWALLA**, WHO BECAME ONE OF THE FIRST INDIAN WOMEN TO GET AN ENGLISH EDUCATION

**I**n 1842, Meheribai, a widow, enrolled her daughter in Mrs Ward's Seminary in Bombay. The decision—coming as it did when “there was a general desire to keep the fair sex in ignorance”—invited fear and loathing. Parsi newspapers carried disapproving articles; sethias threatened ex-communication; and Meheribai's own family railed against the “world-wide publicity”.

Unmoved by “the wrath of the entire male portion of the whole native community”, the mother refused to back down. So it was that little Dosebai ventured beyond the conservative world of Mumbai's Parsi community and became one of the first girls in India to get an English education. Soon, the same sethias were seeking discreet ways to educate their own daughters.

Meheribai's rebellion played a part in furthering women's education in India. It also shaped the life that Dosebai recounts in her autobiography, *The Story of My Life*, first published in 1911 and again by Speaking Tiger this year. It's a fascinating book that reveals how much has changed in Bombay and in the Parsi community in just 150 years. It provides a window into another age: when Bhandoop was a spot for pleasure trips and houses in Tardeo came with sprawling gardens; when driving with your husband in an open carriage or visiting Bandstand with friends was scandalous; when a slight indisposition in the morning could mean death by evening; when independent thought was as unwelcome as diphtheria.

As a child, Dosebai watched her mother fight innumerable battles to live life on her own terms, be it buying

a house at Malabar Hill or educating her daughter. As a wife, Dosebai had to deal with her own challenges: the disapproval of her new family, a husband who made unwise business decisions, and 11 childbirths, of which only three children lived to adulthood.

Often, the book feels like a gossip session with friends—as when Dosebai describes a white satin saree that she embroiders in 42 colours for a family wedding. “My sisters in law, who had ordered for the occasion costly Chinese sarees, were totally eclipsed,” she reports. There are also times when it reads like a travelogue, saved from tedium by the fact that Dosebai's sarees, ornaments and lively spirit open doors everywhere (including the Vatican, where she manages to get an impromptu audience with Pope Leo XIII).

Read the book for the first time,

## ON WHITE MAN'S LAND

**Sonora Jha** weaves a potent story about US academia and the realities of race, privilege and politics

**T**his book brought home to me a fact I have long suspected to be true, but which became very clear while I was reading it: America terrifies me. Since the beginning of this year, there have been 130 mass shootings there in 87 days; just a few days ago, there was a big one in Nashville. Life is cheap in America: you can get it for the price of a 9 mm pistol and a box of rounds from Walmart. But don't get me

titled *The Laughter*, and for sure the first third of it is hilarious. The wit is like Coetzee on acid; it's like Nabokov had a sex change. However, the final third is guaranteed to wipe

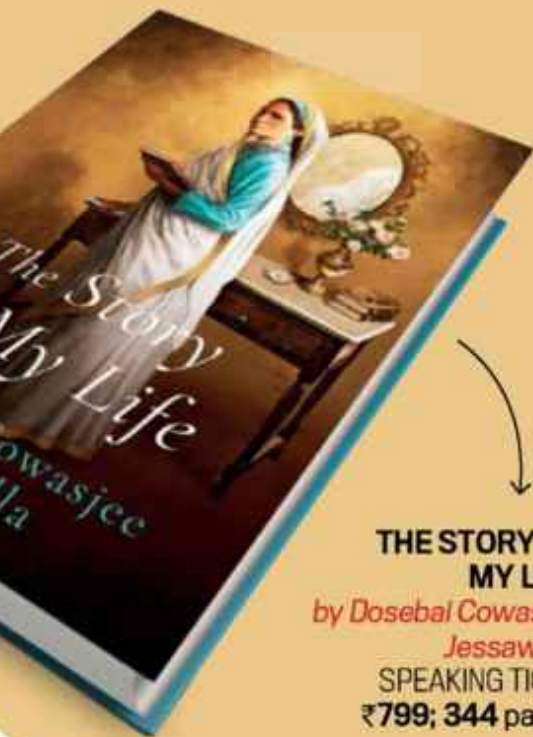
**THE LAUGHTER**  
by Sonora Jha  
HAMISH HAMILTON  
₹599; 320 pages



the smile off your face. It reminds you of how, up until World War II, Americans were largely figures of fun in literature, with their brash manners and their wilful ignorance of the world. It was only as the Cold War unfolded and Bretton Woods strangled us with foreign debt that we began to realise the sinister background to their culture. They stole a country and never said sorry.

The othering that white culture applies

approve of (including white people) is funny only when it isn't backed up by violence. Sometimes we think the violence is only intellectual, as Ruhaba Khan, the protagonist, seems to believe. Ruhaba is a poignantly visualised character, one that I recognise in my students and colleagues. She is at war with those who wish to control her, but her weapons are a headscarf and a few pages of jaunty polemic. Also, she has a weak spot:



**THE STORY OF MY LIFE**  
by Dosebai Cowasjee  
Jessawalla  
SPEAKING TIGER  
₹799; 344 pages

and you see Dosebai's domestic triumphs, squabbles and weekend jaunts. Read it a second time and you hear the clear voice remarking on narrow-mindedness and the treatment of women at the hands of men. "...the time has come for my sisters to demand with unmistakable voice their rights and privileges of which their selfish husbands have so long deprived them," she insists. It's this determination to reject hollow customs and injustices that make Dosebai and her story relevant even today. ■

**Shabnam Minwalla**

Early on in the story, there's a moment when the elderly professor (the antagonist) mishears Adil's 'Khala Ruhaba' as 'Allah hu Akbar'. Adil has been sent to the US from France because his mother fell foul of the headscarf police, and he in his anger met some boys in a mosque and said unassimilated things about French racism. Adil has no idea what hit him, and he soon finds out that the US is scarier

than anything he encountered in Europe. Nevertheless, he is trusting and affectionate, which is his and Ruhaba's downfall.

This is not an easy book to read. It will excoriate you, but in a good way. You will close it feeling thankful that you don't have to live in a white-ruled country. Believe me, I've tried it. It's as bad as Sonora Jha says it is. Maybe worse. ■

**Rimi B. Chatterjee**

## TRIP DOWN GHOST LANE

**Rich characters and themes drive this intense tale by Shahidul Zahir about post-independence Bangladesh**



seemed that in the Ghost Lane of Old Dhaka, rumour and reality mirrored

each other more often than they should. In fact, it's this mixture that's the tour de force of Shahidul Zahir's book *I See The Face*, and which fuels the characters across gender, age, nationality, and class.

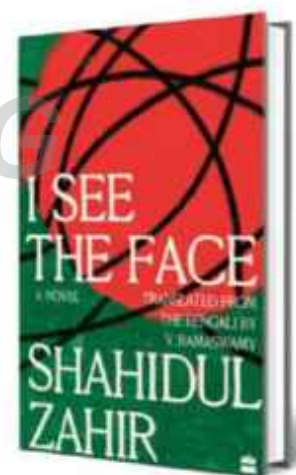
In Ghost Lane, several spectres haunted its residents—for Chan Miya, who had been the talk of the town since he was born 'out of a bundle' and raised by monkeys, the spectre of his abusive childhood haunted him. For his mother, Khoimon, the spectre of poverty borne out of selling paper bags for a living and trading monkey-gossip for food. And for Mrs Zobeida Rahman, the spectre of Khoimon's shrewdness itself.

Most of the novel revolves around three childhood friends who drifted apart gradually: Mamun al Hye, Fakhrul Alam Ledu, and Chan Miya. Among the three, Chan Miya was bullied in school and eventually dropped out because of his association with monkeys and being a fatherless son of a destitute mother. The novel shows a deep class divide that scorns at Khoimon for sending her child to a school that had well-off children.

Despite her efforts, Chan Miya became a car thief and remained in perpetual fear of being caught, but was equally thrilled with every car he stole. Another perspective in the novel is that of Anglo-Indian Mrs Mary Clark and her daughter Julie Florence. Even though they have spent their whole lives in Dhaka, they still

grapple with an identity crisis and imposed alienation that propels young Julie to narrow down her marriage prospects. Mamun, Ledu, and Chan Miya were all taught by Mrs Mary Clark in their primary classes, and the bond sustained as the three grew up. Even though the destinies of the three boys followed paths that were as different as they could be, one thing was common: all of them were smitten by Julie Florence and cooked up romantic stories in their heads imagining her.

The structure of the novel shows its utmost fidelity to the rumours of Ghost Lane. Many alternate realities separated by an occasional 'perhaps' drive the narratives. The possibilities that a single event can contain are all



**I SEE THE FACE**  
by Shahidul Zahir; translated  
from Bengali by V. Ramaswamy  
HARPERCOLLINS  
₹499; 256 pages

written in an enthusiastic detective vein by Zahir. If the story of Chan Miya being the 'Monkey Boy' adds humour and realism to the novel, then the story of Mamun dispenses suspense and mystery. The author portrays post-independence Bangladesh interspersed with Bangladesh's history, the 1971 Liberation War, in a form that echoes the culture of oral storytelling as well as of epic writing. ■

**Saleem Rashid Shah**



Q+A

# CUPID CALLING

Matchmaker **Sima Taparia** is on a roll with a new season of *Indian Matchmaking* on Netflix, brand endorsements, speaking engagements and, of course, loads of matchmaking

India's  
favourite  
matchmaker  
**Sima Aunty**  
is back for  
another  
season

**Q. What can we look forward to in season 3 of *Indian Matchmaking*?**

In the new season, you will see success stories, my family time, travels with my husband, and a new country. I'm also busier than ever with matchmaking and have had to expand my office to deal with the many new enquiries.

**Q. The show has been criticised for not being progressive and promoting old-fashioned values. Do you agree?**

I am a typical Indian woman and I respect Indian values of sharing, shedding ego, understanding, and giving space to your spouse. They are important for a successful, married life. And marriage will remain with humans on this earth.

**Q. When did you decide to become a matchmaker?**

I was interested in socialising since childhood.... Twenty-six years ago, I did a match for my own sister, who is now happily married. Then I thought this is a social need and started suggesting matches for family and friends. Since 2005, I've been doing it professionally.

**Q. A piece of advice you repeatedly give is: "You have to be willing to compromise." Why aren't clients on the show listening?**

People are the same across the world.... Overall, they want their criteria to be matched. My advice is to go forward when you get a 60-70 per cent match—because no one can be a 100 per cent match. Gen Z is changing after watching the show and wants to opt for arranged marriage. Youngsters have loved 'Sima Aunty's' advice. They see that they're getting everything as if from a menu, and I'm receiving enquiries daily.

with Amit Dixit

